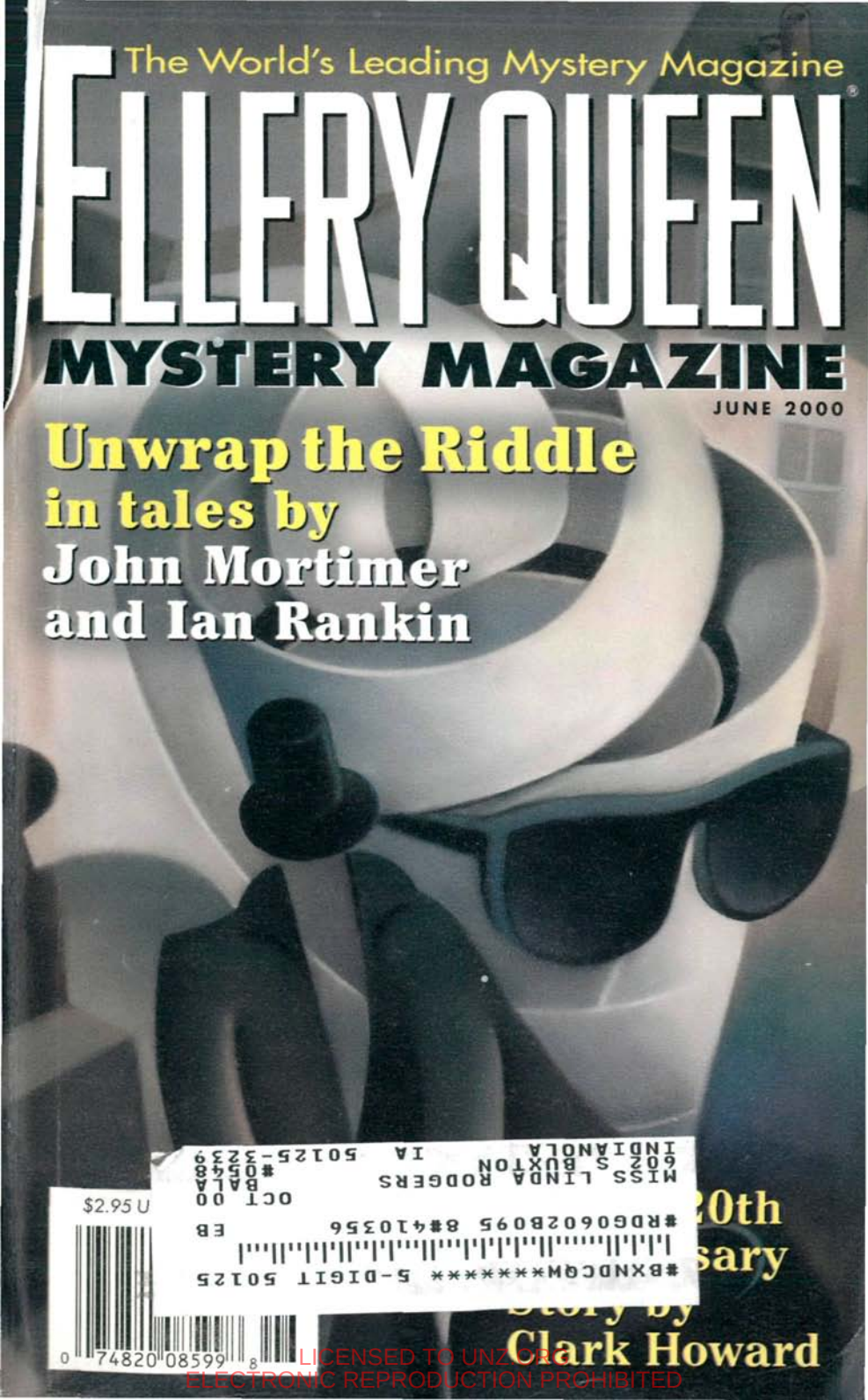
The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

JUNE 2000

Unwrap the Riddle
in tales by
John Mortimer
and Ian Rankin



MISS LINDA RODGERS
602 S BUXTON #0548
INDIANOLA IA 50125-3239
OCT 00 BALA
$2.95 U
EB
#RDG06028095 8#410356
#BXNDCQW******* 5-DIGIT 50125
0 74820 08599 8

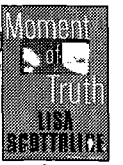
20th
sary

Clark Howard

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Cat's Out of the Bag

Word's gotten around—*Mystery Guild*® has the best mysteries at *purr*-fect prices. Clip the coupon and join us today!



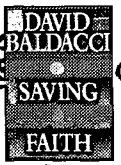
0521* $25.00 17¢

0547 $25.00 17¢

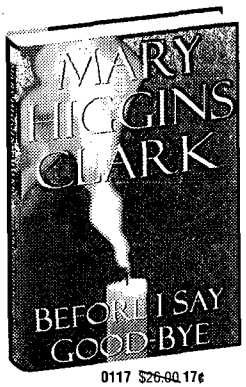
8599* $23.95 17¢

8177 $26.95 17¢

2667 $27.95 17¢



3087* $26.95 17¢



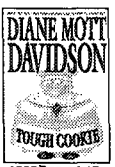
0117 $26.00 17¢

3202* $25.95 17¢

8193 $25.00 17¢

8615 $23.95 17¢

0620 $10.98 17¢



8557 $23.95 17¢

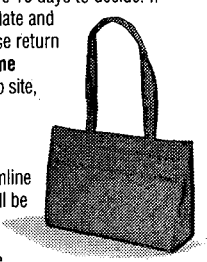
0661 $22.00 17¢

1073 $23.95 17¢

8565 $23.00 17¢

7 REASONS TO JOIN NOW...

1. Joining is easy. Start with **6 books for 99¢**. Your bill (including shipping and handling) will come when membership is confirmed. We'll also send your FREE *Mystery Guild*® Nylon Tote. **2. Your satisfaction is guaranteed.** If you're not happy with your books, return them within 10 days *at our expense*. Your membership will be canceled; you'll owe nothing. The FREE Tote is yours to keep as our "thank you" for trying us. **3. Save up to 60% off** publishers' hardcover edition prices. Just pick at least 4 more books at our regular low prices during your membership. Take up to 2 years! Then you may resign at any time. **4. Extra bonus!** Take a 7th book now for $3.99, plus shipping and handling, and reduce your membership agreement to only 3 books. **5. A FREE Club Magazine** comes to you up to 17 times a year—plus up to 2 special issues. Each reviews the Featured Book Selections and dozens of alternate books. Some are exclusive Club editions you won't find anywhere else. **6. Ordering is risk free.** Featured Book Selections are sent to you automatically. To cancel—or order other books—simply send in your Member Reply Form by mail or contact our Web site by the marked date. Shipping and handling (plus sales tax, where applicable) is added to each order. You'll always have 10 days to decide. If your Member Reply Form is late and unwanted books arrive, please return them *at our expense*. **7. Online convenience.** Join at our Web site, **www.joinMysteryGuild.com**, for faster service and an even larger selection of books. Members may order books online or by mail. Internet orders will be processed within 48 hours.



FREE TOTE with membership

* Explicit scenes and/or language

All prices are current as we go to press.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

0711* $26.95 17¢

1172 $12.98 17¢

7757 $26.95 17¢

1446 $26.00 17¢

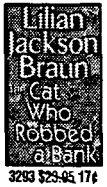
7641 $25.95 17¢

0109 $22.95 17¢

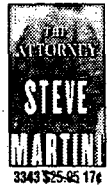
2378* $24.95 17¢

8276* $25.00 17¢

0836 $26.00 17¢



3293 $23.95 17¢



3343 $25.95 17¢

0745 $24.95 17¢

8581* $26.00 17¢

8623 $22.95 17¢

8250 $19.98 17¢

2584 $25.00 17¢

0588 $11.98 17¢

Take 6 mysteries for 99¢

with membership

J258 EQM 6/00

MYSTERY
www.joinMysteryGuild.com

MAIL TO:
Mystery Guild®
6550 East 30th Street, P.O. Box 6362
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

Please write book numbers here:

YES! Please enroll me in *Mystery Guild*® according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 6 BOOKS I've indicated. Bill me just 99¢, plus shipping and handling. Also, send me the FREE Nylon Tote. I agree to buy 4 books in the next 2 years.

Mr./Mrs.
Miss/Ms. _____

Address _____ Apt. _____
(please print)

City _____

State _____ ZIP _____

Home telephone, please: (___)_____

Please sign
(if under 18, parent must sign)_____

08 ### ### 58 59 ET214

SAVE MORE NOW! Send me this book now and reduce my commitment to 3 books. Bill me an added $3.99, plus shipping and handling.
Please write book number here:

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CONTENTS

FICTION

A deadly plot
Page 64

The Silence
BY KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH 4

Rumpole and the Actor Laddie
BY JOHN MORTIMER 33

The Confession BY IAN RANKIN 40

Pigeons BY JOSEPH MONNINGER 46

The Allotment BY PETER CROWTHER 64

A Wall Too High
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 83

The End of the Pier
BY ALISON WHITE 100

The Siesta BY EDGAR BRAU 109

Blood Paths BY CLARK HOWARD 116

Peril at seaside
Page 100

Cover Illustration by
Scott Hodgdon

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 61

POETRY

Cleaning Up BY PEGGY WYSONG 39

Net Results BY KATHERINE H. BROOKS 97

PUZZLES

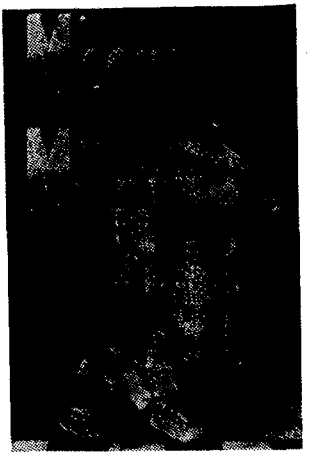
The Mystery Crossword BY LEIGH WOZNICK 98

Dell Magazines
475 Park Avenue South
New York, NY 10016

Note: indicia on
page 143

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

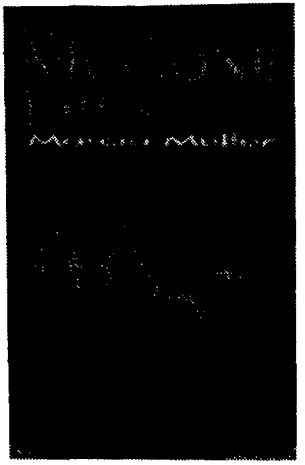
BOOKS BY MARCIA MULLER!



NEW!!!!!!!!

McCONE AND FRIENDS

7 stories and a novella about Sharon McCone and her associates.
Trade softcover (ISBN: 1885941-38-2)
$16.00.



THE McCONE FILES

The 1st collection of Sharon McCone short stories; winner of the Anthony Award for Best Collection.
Trade softcover (ISBN: 1885941-05-6)
4th printing, $15.00

For sale from mystery bookstores, or order directly from the publisher, including $2.25 s/h for the 1st book; $1.00 each additional copy. Virginia residents must add 4.5% sales tax. We accept Visa and MasterCard. Email us at CrippenL@Pilot.Infi.Net; visit our website at www.crippenlandru.com

Crippen & Landru also publishes new short story collections by Doug Allyn, P.M. Carlson, Michael Gilbert, Ed Gorman, Jeremiah Healy, Edward D. Hoch, Clark Howard, H.R.F. Keating, Peter Lovesey, Margaret Maron, Patricia Moyes, Bill Pronzini, Ellery Queen, Peter Robinson, and James Yaffe.

CRIPPEN & LANDRU, PUBLISHERS
P.O. BOX 9315, DEPT. E
NORFOLK, VA 23505

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Laurie Harden

THE SILENCE

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

It was the city's fifteenth day without a homicide. The tabloids blared the news, almost daring the crazies to break the streak. I worried too, worried that there were deaths we weren't seeing, worried that something had turned, making the world into a strange and unrecognizable place.

I missed the mayhem. I didn't want to admit it, to myself or anyone else, but I missed the uncertainty of walking into a murder scene and feeling that edge of violence still lingering in the air. Not that there wasn't violence. In New York, violence is as common as air, but during the last fifteen days, it hadn't led to anything. People got mugged, just like always, beaten, just like always, but no one seemed to have the urge to haul out a gun and fire it at someone else.

And they should have. That's what got me. It was August—hot, stinking, humid August—and we'd just come off a full moon. The lunatics should have been out in force, and they weren't.

For the first time in years, I wished I was a flatfoot and not a member of the mayor's special Homicide task force. I wanted to

©2000 by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ride a car, have a partner, walk a beat. I wanted to bust up a few fights, threaten a few crackheads, rescue a kid from a tree.

I wanted something, anything, except the old cases in front of me, the ones whose trails were so cold that the ice on the files was thick and blue. On day three of The Silence, as the *Daily News* was calling the strangeness, the chief called the entire Homicide task force into his office and gave us options: We could assist some of the other task forces—Narcotics or Robbery or, God forbid, Missing Persons—or we could close some cases we didn't normally have time to close. Me, I thought closing would be good. It would keep the task force together, and the task force was one of the few things from the mayor's anti-crime initiatives that was working. Closing would also prove what I had always said, that a good cop could solve any case given enough time.

An *EQMM* Readers Award winner for 1998, and a recipient of many other awards, mostly in the field of science fiction, Kristine Kathryn Rusch proved, in 1999, that her versatility is extraordinary. Without stint, she penned, one after another, a romance novel for Kensington, a science fiction novel in her Black Throne series for Bantam, and a mystery novel for St. Martin's Press — while also managing to produce fine stories such as this!

A man should carry a tape recorder around to know how fatuous he sounds when he makes pronouncements like that. Then he wouldn't have to eat his words twelve days later when not one cold case had turned hot, when not one file, iced open, warmed shut.

I didn't even have anything promising: not the Puerto Rican wife stabbed fifteen times in her apartment; not the street thug shot once through the heart and left inside a dumpster on 42nd; not even the bloated, naked, fish-belly-white corpse that had floated up the East River one July afternoon. On him, I couldn't even get an ID.

So it didn't seem strange when Evelyn sauntered over to my desk wearing a light brown suit that made her look as if her mother had dressed her in her older sister's clothes. She slapped her hand on the gray Formica surface, and the sound echoed in the nearly empty House.

Three other Homicide detectives looked up. They were surrounded by stacks of files, just like I was. Only the five of us remained. The others in our task force had scattered like the winds, knowing early that the need for action was much more important than the need for closure.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I say what we need is a wager." She leaned against my desk because I was best known as the task force's betting man. I'd wager on anything legal, and even some things that weren't, given Vice didn't hear about it.

Because I was intrigued and because I didn't want to show it, I gave her a good old-fashioned up and down. "What do you need a wager for?" I asked. "You got court today. That's enough excitement for any person."

She snorted through her nose, an unladylike habit that somehow made her more appealing. "Shows what you know," she said. "I got an interview on WPIX about The Silence."

"What's the wager?" Bob asked. He was a skinny man with too much hair and a deceptively relaxed air about him. Beneath it was one of the best detectives I ever knew.

"First one to close a case buys a round?" she said, although she sounded uncertain.

"Hell," Weisburg said, tugging on his coffee-stained yellow jersey, "the way things've been going, the first one to close should get a medal."

"Yeah." Hawkins slammed a hand on top of his files. "These things are colder than a witch's tit."

I would have expected a cliché from him, just like I would expect him to lose the wager. Hawkins was a political appointment who rose in the ranks because he knew how to play the game—and how to take more credit than he was due. He'd done that to me once; he wasn't ever going to do it again.

"Glad to hear I'm not the only one having trouble closing," Evelyn said.

"Maybe this is part of The Silence," Bob said. We all stared at each other. Cops were just superstitious enough to worry about such things. This dry spell, this Silence, or whatever you wanted to call it, was making us nervous; to think our own inability to close was tied to it only made us even more nervous.

Finally it was Hawkins who broke the mood. "Yeah," he said. "Tell that to the chief."

And we all laughed, not because he was being funny—he wasn't—but because we needed to.

"Whatcha working on, Spence?" Evelyn asked, leaning over my desk.

"Nothing great. How 'bout you?"

"Same," she said. "You guys?"

The other three shrugged in unison. It almost looked as if they'd planned the gesture.

"Narc arrests are up," Bob said.

"Vice arrests are down," Hawkins said.

"None of our people went to Vice," I said.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"There you go," Evelyn said with a smile. "What we gotta worry about is when all them missing persons get found."

This time we matched her smile, and meant it. "So what's going wrong here?" I asked. "Did only the incompetent ones vote to remain in Homicide?"

"That's what the chief's gonna think," Hawkins said.

Bob shook his head. "Chief knows these cases are cold."

"You'd think at least one would break, though," Weisburg said.

"You'd think," Evelyn agreed.

I pushed my chair away from the desk. "Maybe we're going about this wrong."

"You up for the wager?" Evelyn asked.

"Maybe," I said. "How're you approaching cases?"

"Traditionally. Newest to oldest."

"Bob?"

"Same."

"Weisburg?"

"Same."

"Hawkins?"

"Yeah, man, me too."

I sighed. "And me too. Maybe that's what's wrong."

"Go again?" Evelyn said.

I leaned forward. "What's your favorite case?"

"Favorite how?"

"Weirdest, strangest, most intriguing. Most unsolvable. I don't give a damn. Whatever rings your bells."

She didn't even have to think for a minute. "I got a shoe on Fifty-third, middle of the damn street. Some bike messenger picked it up, was gonna give it to his girlfriend, I don't know. But it's full of blood. He don't drop it. He carries it to the curb and uses his cell to call the cops. They show up, order a DNA on the blood, find it matches the interior of a bloody car found on Lex three days before. Car belongs to a young married over Central Park West. The wife's been missing two weeks. She takes fifty grand in cash and disappears, and the husband don't think nothing of it."

"You think the husband did it?" Hawkins asked.

"I think we got strange breaks in the case. The DNA on the blood, for one. Who'da thought there'd be a match?"

"Who thought to look?" Weisburg asked.

"I did," she said. "I figure you got a blood-filled shoe, you gotta have other blood-filled items."

"The problem is," I said, "how'd the shoe get to Fifty-third, full of blood, three days later?"

"Give the man a cigar," she said. "That's the most interesting case to me."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

This last she said almost as a topper, as if she dared someone to do better. Of course, Hawkins tried.

"I got that torso found in the Hundred-and-tenth Street station."

"Some jumper," Weisburg said.

"Yeah, they probably couldn't find the rest of him 'coz it was mashed against some subway car."

"I think it's more than that," Hawkins said.

"Why?" I asked, more to find out how Hawkins's brain worked than out of any real curiosity about the torso.

"Because the cuts was real neat. Jumpers, they get ragged sheer. This looked like it was done with one of them surgeon's knives. And the skin was clean, too. No dirt, except where it was on the floor. And no blood."

"When was this?" Weisburg asked.

"May. About the fifth. You know, that freaky rainstorm?"

"No wonder I didn't hear," he said. "I was upstate with the kids." Weisburg usually got the body parts.

"Well, I think it's damn strange," Hawkins said.

Weisburg leaned forward a little. "A torso with arms or a torso without?"

"Without. What do you think, I'm some kind of idiot? I'd'a known to run the prints."

Weisburg shrugged. "I'll look at it if you want."

Hawkins looked at me. "If he helps me close, does that make it his case or mine?"

"What are you looking at me for?" I asked. "The wager's Evelyn's idea."

"But you're the one who mentioned favorite cases," she said. "Right, Weisburg?"

He scrunched up his narrow little face. "I think having favorite homicide cases is sick."

"Yeah, like you didn't just get jealous that Hawkins has a torso and you don't," Evelyn said.

I leaned back in my chair. "Come on, Weisburg. You must have a case that intrigues you."

"It's not a favorite," he said a bit defensively.

I shrugged. "I phrased it wrong."

He ducked his head, and I could have sworn that he was blushing. "It's the puppies."

I'd never heard of this one. "The puppies?"

He nodded, raised his head, and sure enough, there was color in his pasty white cheeks. "Outside the Port Authority Terminal, in April, you know that really sunny stretch around tax time?"

We all nodded. Who could forget that weather?

"Some woman calls Animal Control because there's eight German shepherd puppies, about six months old, just sitting curbside.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They're well behaved, ain't doing nothing, but they was there all day, and this lady got worried. So Animal Control shows up and finds they're sitting in a ring around this corpse. Now you'd think the guy was homeless except for the dogs. They're purebred, or so the pound tells me, and they have on expensive collars but no tags. It took Animal Control a long time to round 'em up, too. They was guarding this guy, so they were attached."

"What happened to the dogs?" Bob asked.

Weisburg grinned. "I gave 'em to my daughter." His daughter had married money and had a country house near the Catskills. "They're great dogs."

"Nothing on the guy?" I asked.

"No missing breeders, no nothing. We didn't even know it was a homicide for two days."

"What was it killed him, then?" Evelyn asked.

"Choked."

"Choked?" Bob asked.

Weisburg nodded. "On some woman's left index finger."

We let that sit for a few minutes, then Evelyn said, "Bob?"

"I ain't got nothing to compare to that."

"But you have a favorite case?"

He shrugged. "I got one that bugs me. But it's just simple."

"Simple how?" I asked.

He shrugged again. "Or maybe it's not so simple. I don't know."

"Bob," Evelyn said.

"Okay," he said. "Husband and wife in the Village are having this argument. They live in a walk-up and their fights are always interesting enough to draw the neighbors. This time, the wife has had it, and she grabs a gun, tries to shoot the husband, but before she can pull the trigger, he grabs her arm and they flail around. Of course, the gun goes off, and one of the neighbors gets it smack in the face. Dies."

"Seems straightforward," Hawkins said.

"Don't it?" Bob said. "Until you come to find that the neighbor owns the apartment building and in his will he leaves it to the couple. Now everyone swears they didn't know he owned it, and everyone swears that no one knew the contents of that will."

"You think it was deliberate?"

"I *know* it was," Bob said. "Just can't prove it. At least, not enough to get the D.A. to look at the case."

Evelyn shook her head. "See? Impossible cases, all of them."

"Yeah, but I'd'a said it was impossible for there to be no murders in the Big Apple for one day, let alone fifteen," Weisburg said.

"So what are you saying?" I asked.

"I'm saying maybe this is our chance. Maybe we can solve these things."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"So what's the wager?" Evelyn asked.

"One week," Bob said. "We get one week to solve our baby or we gotta trade it to someone else."

"If they solve it, we'll look like a putz," Hawkins said.

Bob grinned and pointed at him. "You got it in one."

"Don't get all excited," Evelyn said. "We ain't heard from Spence yet."

I held out my hands. "You guys get all the interesting cases."

"And you're holding out," Evelyn said.

Indeed I was. But she caught me. I felt the color rise in my cheeks.

"Ah, he's got an embarrassing one too," Hawkins said.

I shook my head. "It's the image that got me, not the case."

"Image?" Evelyn asked.

I took a deep breath. Sometimes revealing yourself to your colleagues wasn't all it was cracked up to be. "There's a doll hospital just north of Bloomies—"

"A doll hospital?" Hawkins asked.

"Yeah," Weisburg said. "A place you can take favorite toys to be repaired."

"Or antique toys," Evelyn said.

"Anyway," I said, feeling the heat deepen, "they had this guy. They called him the wiz because he could fix damn near anything. You'd bring in a turn-of-the-century Steif, no stuffing, no arms for God's sake—"

"Stiff?" Hawkins whispered to Weisburg.

"Steif," Weisburg said.

"It's a collectible stuffed bear," Evelyn snapped. "Now shut up and let him talk."

"Anyway, he could turn it around in a day or two and have the thing looking like it just come off the assembly line. He was a master, the best, they all said that."

"And he was murdered," Bob said.

"You got it," I said. "I'd'a thought it was simple burglary too—they had a load of collectibles from Sotheby's that disappeared that night—except for the dolls."

"The dolls?" Hawkins asked, obviously willing to work for every detail.

"The dolls. When the staff came in the next morning, they found dolls all over him—no blood on them, even though he'd been stabbed in an artery and there was blood everywhere. The dolls were hooded and masked in surgical clothes and they were poised over the body like they was trying to fix him."

Hawkins snorted and looked away. "Nice try, but you could've made up something better than that."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I stared at him. He slowly looked back at me. Then he frowned. "You mean you weren't making that up?"

"Nope. They left the body as it was, and the call came in here. I got photos."

"But no suspects."

"No suspects, no motive, no nothing."

"The stolen collectibles?"

"Never were shipped. It was clerical error. Sotheby's dropped them off the day *after* the murder."

"So not even a robbery."

"Nothing," I agreed.

"When was this?" Evelyn asked.

"Valentine's Day," I said. "I remember because we were having that deep freeze."

"Oh, yeah," Bob said.

"So," Hawkins said. "The wager?"

Weisburg shrugged. "I'm willing to give it a shot. I have a fondness for those dogs."

"You gonna mind if someone else cleans up your mess?" Bob asked with a grin.

"I figure The Silence is gonna end by tomorrow morning and this is all gonna become moot," Weisburg said.

Evelyn grinned. "That's his way of agreeing to the proposition. We all in?"

I glanced around the room. Everyone was nodding. "We're all in," I said.

I had never worked on a case that was six months old before. I'd never had the luxury. But as I reviewed my notes, I realized that the case had only intrigued me in hindsight. I would find myself thinking of those dolls, poised over the body like a Lilliputian surgical team, and smile.

Smile.

Sometimes this job got to me.

I had actually only spent an afternoon on the case, even though when the dead guy's family called long distance every few weeks, I would tell them the file was still open. In truth, the next day I got slammed with three drive-bys, a potential serial, and a famous floater, and the doll-hospital murder got shoved aside by more pressing—and more easily solvable—cases.

I think that's often the way. We usually close about seventy-five percent, but that's because most murderers are stupid. Think about it: The best way to solve a problem is not to take out a gun and blow someone away. The twenty-five percent unsolved are either lost in the shuffle, committed by a professional who knows how to hide his tracks, or done by someone smart who has been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thinking of the crime for a long, long time. That's one thing we rarely tell people: If the killer's smart, chances are he'll get away.

The doll-hospital murderer had been smart, or in the very least, lucky. There were no fingerprints in the place, except for the ones that needed to be there, and despite all the blood, there wasn't a decent shoe or hand print either. No murder weapon, and no motive, at least not one I could find.

I stared at the photos. The victim, one Joel Dudich, was slender to the point of gauntness, balding, and had a tattoo of a teddy bear on his right forearm. I took out a magnifying glass and examined the tattoo. The work was fine, even artistic, and bore a vague resemblance to the posable doctor bear who was sitting on the edge of the table, his furry arms crossed as if he were denying the patient treatment.

In fact, the doctor was the only bear, even though I had made a note in my case file that Dudich specialized in bears. The other creatures around him, the ones who were trying to save him, were dressed as orderlies or nurses—no doctors at all. I recognized a ripped Raggedy Ann, an early 1960s Barbie that was missing one arm, and a headless G.I. Joe.

The others had their little backs to me, but I could probably identify them if I tried hard enough. My father had owned a toy store in the small Pennsylvania town where I grew up, and he treated each doll and stuffed animal as if it had a presence all its own. He was a good and gentle man, and he had always seemed astonished that his only son had taken to the violence of police work, ending in the most violent side of all—chasing difficult homicides in the mean streets of New York.

I turned the large glossy photograph of the corpse facedown, skipped the autopsy photos for the moment, and reread my case notes.

Dudich had lived alone in a fifth-floor walk-up that he couldn't afford. His most recent roommate, a woman, had left him abruptly, at least according to the super, two weeks before the murder. The super figured they were lovers, and there was nothing in the record to confirm or contradict that. Dudich's name was the only one on the lease, and none of his friends knew who the girl was.

His coworkers found him strange and fey, his habits those of a prima donna in a small pond. They claimed they never spoke to him about his personal life. He came in late, snapped at anyone who interrupted him, and didn't care who he insulted. But everyone put up with it because his work was so beautiful. Clients came back, asking for him by name: parents wanting their children's toys repaired; collectors wanting their valuables restored to mint

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

condition; and, in the end, galleries and auction houses taking advantage of his relatively cheap services.

"Could've gotten more money," I had written in the margin. It was a reference to an interview with one of Dudich's colleagues, who couldn't understand why Dudich stayed at the hospital when he had been offered a much higher salary with several of the antique shops on the Upper West Side.

I circled the comment and underlined it, thinking it a place to start. But before I went further, I finished with the file, making sure my memory was jogged. The family was out of state—Iowa—and they confessed that they hadn't seen him since he graduated from a cow college at which he had shown no sign of his particular gifts. I had covered a lot of ground that first day. It was too bad that I hadn't followed up on it.

Just before I left the House, I noted that the others were looking more excited than they had since The Silence began. Evelyn had put all her files under her desk. She had gone to her interview, but she had left on her desktop a computer-generated list of all the blood-spattered unidentified objects found around the time her shoe had been located.

Hawkins was on the phone with the forensic pathologist, talking about the possibility of matching a severed arm to the mysterious torso. Weisburg was typing on the task force's computer, doing an Internet search of New York area dog breeders. And Bob was poring over a copy of the dead landlord's will, making notes and circles and lines, and muttering to himself.

Finally, it looked like a normal day in the task force. We hadn't had one for more than two weeks.

I walked down the faded wood steps and through the double doors out to the city. It didn't look different. Horns honked, brakes squealed as taxis nearly rear-ended real cars. Pedestrians didn't even look. They walked, heads high, to their next destination. It was hot, of course, being August, and the men wore short sleeves and slung their suitcoats over their shoulders with one hand and clutched their briefcases with the other. Women wore dresses and no nylons and clutched their briefcases too. A car backfired as I reached the end of the block and everyone ducked, just like they always did, thinking it was a gunshot.

I walked to the doll hospital. It wasn't too far from the House, and I liked to keep a finger on the city's pulse. The heat was unbearable, and within minutes, I had my suitcoat off too. The stink was worse, though. New York always smells bad in the height of summer: garbage sitting on the curbs waiting for collection; the way the exhaust from cars hangs in the air; and the gen-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eral odor of sweaty humans who have no business being so close to each other, but because of the nature of the city, are.

I didn't have a formal line of questioning ready when I reached the hospital. All I knew was that I wanted to see what had happened since the loss of their star, since Dudich had died on them and taken away so much lucrative business.

When I reached the building, saw the small sign covered with dirt and flies, I had a bad feeling, but it wasn't until I walked up the narrow stairs into a growing darkness that I knew.

The hospital was gone. Not vanished-gone, but out-of-business gone. I stopped at the glass door with the For Rent sign taped in a corner of the window, and peered through the soaping someone had done to prevent just this sort of snooping.

The tables were gone inside, and all that remained was a gray vinyl floor covered with thin midafternoon sunlight. A doll's arm lay in a corner, and a high-heeled shoe, probably from an early Barbie doll, had a spot all its own beneath a wall. Otherwise, there was no evidence that the doll hospital had been there. The tidy place with the bewildered employees, the ones who had described their job as a happy one until Dudich died, had vanished as if it had never been.

I moved away from the door and went back down the stairs. The tenant below was a women's boutique with about 500 square feet of floor space. It probably cost a fortune just to maintain that, even though this wasn't one of Manhattan's priciest neighborhoods. I let myself in.

The dresses were all variations on the same theme, a drapey disco sort of dress that I thought had gone out of style twenty years before. Some were decorated with shell necklaces. Others had scarves for accents. The woman behind the small table that served as a counter wore her long hair in a thousand beaded braids. She wore orange lipstick that set off her dark skin, and her inch-long nails, which looked real, were painted orange to match.

"Help you?" she asked in a disinterested New York tone that belied the Jamaican melody in the vowels.

"I was wondering what happened to the doll hospital."

"Closed." She hadn't even looked up yet.

"When?"

"Ah, March. The last day was the freak snowstorm on the third. I remember because they were setting toys out in the snow."

"Is there anyone I can talk to connected with the hospital?"

She pulled open a drawer in the table, and using those long fingernails like pincers, removed a cream-colored business card. "Don't blame me if she doesn't get back to you," the woman said. "She's the only one now, and she's working out of her home."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I took the card. Apparently this boutique got a lot of inquiries about the doll hospital. She hadn't even asked for my ID.

"Do you have any idea why it closed?"

She raised her eyes to mine. They were magnificent, the stunning centerpiece to what I just realized was a remarkable face. "Why, the murder, of course."

"The murder?"

"Of the wiz boy. The one who could repair anything. They say the dolls surprised him in the middle of the night, but I don't believe it."

"You don't?" I asked in a tone that I hoped didn't sound patronizing.

"No. If they killed him, why were they found trying to save him, now? They were found all around him, like little doctors. But they couldn't do anything."

"So, they didn't find out who did it?"

She shrugged. "I don't think they ever will. The police have too much to do to look into the death of one pimply-faced guy with a fascination for teddy bears."

Ouch. That one hit too close to home. I took a step away from the table, as if I were getting ready to leave. "Aren't you afraid to work here, after someone got murdered upstairs?"

She laughed. "Mister, I live in New York. If I was afraid of everything that happened, I'd move to somewhere where nothing happened."

I smiled in response. "Good point," I said, and thanked her for her time. Then I left the store and stepped back into the oven that was the street.

Halfway down the block, I paused and looked at the card. It had a name—Lena O'Dell; an occupation—toy repair; and a contact phone number with a Manhattan exchange but no address. I walked back to the House and used the number to trace the address. She lived in the Village. I thought of calling before I went to see if she was home, but then I changed my mind.

She was the only lead I had, and I didn't want to scare her away.

Evelyn was just arriving as I was leaving. She had changed out of her power suit and into her usual jeans and blouse. She was whistling as she came up the stairs.

"What're you smiling about?" I asked as we passed.

"Found the other shoe," she said.

"Really?" I stopped on the way down.

"Yep. Recovered from a dumpster on Fiftieth, same area. Forms a triangle with the first shoe and the car. And, get this, there's a bloody handprint on the back. That's why the station kept it."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Lucky break."

She grinned over her shoulder at me. "You don't know the half of it."

She was close. She had to be or she wouldn't be in such a good mood. "Give."

She shook her head. Then she turned and jogged up the stairs before I could ask the next question.

She did that on purpose, of course. I sighed, and walked down the rest of the way, wishing my luck were running the same as hers.

I took my company car to the Village because I didn't want to hassle with getting a cab. Parking was hell, even on days like this, but I squeezed into a spot on a side street without denting any bumpers. Then I walked around the corner to the address I had.

It was a dilapidated building with a recessed steel door with a 1970s security system. Someone had propped the inner door open with a brick and I suspected it was often left that way. I glanced at the names penned beside the row of doorbells and saw O'Dell in Number 3. I slipped through the door into the hallway and started up the stairs.

The place felt like a sauna. A window on the landing was painted shut and caked with dirt. Not that it mattered. It provided a view of the building across the back alley and nothing more. I doubted that opening it would provide a breeze.

The second floor smelled of garlic and feta cheese. There was a narrow hallway that ran the length of the floor, and the stairs continued up one side. Apartment 3 was just beyond the railing, the door firmly closed.

I knocked.

I heard a small scraping against the wood as someone peered through the peephole. Then a woman's voice said, "What?"

I held up my badge. "Miss O'Dell. I'm Detective Spencer Gray. I'm handling the murder of Joel Dudich."

"God," she said. "And here I thought you were gonna wait until the Second Coming before you continued your investigation."

I heard several locks click and then the door opened, sending frigid air into the hallway. A window air-conditioning unit hummed in the background.

O'Dell leaned against the door frame. She was slender and barefoot, wearing jeans and a ratty T-shirt that was covered with bits of thread. Her hair was red and curly, her skin nearly as dark as the boutique owner's.

I didn't remember seeing her before, but that had been months ago, in a case I normally would have forgotten.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Gray," she said. "You were there asking questions when they took Joel's body away."

I nodded. I guess I had seen her.

"You wanna come in, or you gonna interrogate me in the hall?"

"It's not an interrogation, Miss O'Dell. I just need information."

She stepped away from the door. I went inside, glad for the icy air. Her apartment was a clutter of books and spider plants, with plush toys on every available surface. A coffinlike box stood against one wall. It was filled with broken toys like the ones I had initially seen in the hospital. A thick wooden door was braced on cinder blocks and on top of it were several stuffed dogs, all missing the right leg. A series of half-finished legs sat in a row beside them.

She took a doll off a caftan-covered armchair and asked me to sit. I did and nearly sank to the floor. The chair had no springs. I tried not to show my surprise.

"What happened to the hospital?" I asked.

She glared at me, then sat on the blanket-covered couch, next to a group of limbless dolls. "It didn't go without Joel."

"One employee couldn't be that important."

"He had a talent, he did, and everyone came for him. When he died—" She held out her hands and didn't finish the sentence.

"What kept him at the hospital? I heard he could have worked for Sotheby's or any of the antique stores at a much higher rate."

Her face softened. She had been a beautiful woman once, several years of stress ago. "The kids," she said.

"You had children in the doll hospital?"

She nodded. "They came with their parents, mothers usually. It took some work to get men to come into a place devoted to dolls." And then she looked at me like that was the reason I hadn't finished the investigation. "Joel liked watching their faces when he gave them the fixed toy. Said it made his entire week."

"Know anyone who would want to kill him?"

"Just about everyone," she said, and her answer surprised me. Then she looked down at her hands. "Except the customers, of course."

"Of course," I said.

"Look," she said. "He wasn't the nicest guy. I think he hung out with dolls because he didn't much like people. There was something in his past, in his childhood, he never talked about, and he said he could get the sweetness he was denied then when he looked at kids' faces. That's the part of Joel I like to remember."

"And what's the part you want to forget?"

She flinched, then smoothed the faded denim on her jeans. "He had a temper," she whispered, as if, even now, he could hear her.

"He ever inflict it on you?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"On anyone who wasn't as good as he was. Or as quick." She glanced up, her dark eyes haunted. "I didn't like him much, and at first, I was glad he was dead."

I waited again. She would say more if I just gave her enough time.

"Then I learned how much I had come to depend on him. Closing the hospital was the toughest thing I've ever done."

I nodded. "Where were you the night he died?"

"You asked me that the first time," she said.

"Tell me again."

"Here." She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against her couch. "Unfortunately, I was here. Alone."

"And your other employees?"

"You'll have to ask them."

"Do you have a list of names?"

She nodded, seemingly grateful to get off that couch and be busy. I took the moment to scan the apartment more carefully. There were no photographs behind the spider plants, no signs that anyone except O'Dell had ever been in this apartment. After a moment, she handed me a carefully lettered piece of paper with six names on it.

"All but one are still in the city," she said.

"And where's the one?" I asked.

She shrugged. "She disappeared the day after Joel was killed."

News of the disappearance should have excited me, but it didn't. Not really. It was too easy, for one, and for another, it was too convenient. Not that murders ever go the way you want them to. But when I heard about the employee that got away, I didn't feel those stomach butterflies that usually told me things were going well. I felt a shiver travel down my spine, so strong that I wondered if O'Dell had seen me shake.

The disappeared was named Melanie Glisando, and she had been Dudich's on-again off-again lover, something none of the employees had bothered to tell me in the first investigation. I didn't yell at O'Dell for that. I also didn't yell at her for failing to tell me that Glisando hadn't shown up for work on the day of my investigation. I would save the rougher emotions for later, in case I needed them.

Instead, I had her tell me more about Glisando, and from what I heard, she was Dudich's perfect match—a woman who was interested in toys, a woman who could repair even the most stubborn of tears, a woman who didn't mind spending her days on a pursuit most considered frivolous. She had kept an apartment two buildings down from O'Dell, although she rarely used it. I stopped at

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the apartment after I left O'Dell's, and the super mentioned that he had thrown Glisando's things away just the week before.

"Hard to tell whether she was really gone or not. She had this lover, see, and she spent time there, and you know how it is. This place gets to be where she stores her stuff. Not that she had a lot of stuff."

"Did she take anything with her when she left?"

The super shrugged. "How'm I supposed to know? I don't case my people's places, you know? I don't compare before and after."

"Anything unusual in her apartment?"

The super wrinkled his nose. I braced myself. "Naw," he said. "Not unless you count all them toys."

"Toys?"

"Yeah." His grimace grew. "They was posed all over the place. Little scenes, like you'd find in store windows."

Scenes. I should have felt the butterflies then, but I didn't. Something was off with this case, something intangible.

"What did you do with the toys?" I asked.

"I was gonna toss 'em, but the missus, she said no, kids would want them. I gotta listen to her, you know how it is, so I take 'em to one of them specialty shops and they was glad to have 'em. Made a few bucks off 'em and put that against the rent."

He told me this last as if it would shock me. It didn't.

"What shop?" I asked.

He told me, and I made a note, although I wasn't sure I would go.

"How'd you know Glisando was gone?" I asked.

"No rent in the mail," he said. "That's the one thing she was good at, paying her rent."

"When did the payments stop?"

"Last month," he said.

I blamed my growing depression on the heat. The pieces of information I got were the kind a detective wanted to have, the bits of another person's life, the fragmented details that constituted part of a puzzle and led me to believe I could solve this. The House was even hotter than the street, and as I came in our sarge informed me that the air conditioning was out, and they already had someone upstairs working on the problem.

I wiped the sweat off the back of my neck with a handkerchief that had seen better days, and then I went up the stairs, expecting to be the only detective in that steamy place. Instead the entire crew had gathered, bottles of water in a bucket on the floor, like someone was holding a party without the booze.

Everyone looked as down as I felt.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I picked up one of the water bottles and held it to my forehead. It felt like a blast of frigid air. "Who do I have to thank for this?"

"Hawkins," Evelyn said.

I opened my eyes. Hawkins didn't even bring in donuts on his assigned day. The man was cheaper than any skate I'd ever seen.

He met my gaze, then looked away, as if he knew what I was thinking.

"What's the occasion?" I asked, thinking this was almost as strange as the damn Silence.

"No occasion," he said.

"He found one of the arms that matched that torso," Weisburg said.

"Got an ID?" I asked.

Hawkins took a swig of his water, making me think of booze yet again. Only in a heat wave could a man approach water like it was wine.

"That's the problem," he said. "I been wanting to talk to you guys. Any of you think that maybe we shouldn't solve these cases?"

I rolled my eyes. Evelyn sat down behind her desk so hard that the wheels on her chair moved and she spun. Bob shook his head ever so slightly. Only Weisburg didn't move.

"All right," I said. "I give. Why shouldn't we solve these cases?"

"Because," Hawkins said. "Maybe they're what's causing The Silence."

"So, lemme get this straight," Evelyn said. "If we solve these cases, The Silence ends and we got a new crime wave on our hands."

"Hell," I said. "That means we're directly responsible for all future homicides."

"You know," Bob said, "I knew you liked slacking off, Hawkins, but I didn't think you'd go to these lengths."

"I'm serious," he said. "These're all strange cases, and what if they're the key?"

"Yeah," I said. "Sure. It'd be our cases, not the ones at the hundred-and-sixth or the ones in Brooklyn or somewhere else. And out of all the unsolved we got, we just happened to pick the five that were the cause of The Silence, and if we solve them, then well, sorry New York, it's business as usual?"

Hawkins flushed. "Put that way, it sounds kinda funny."

"Yeah, it does," Bob said.

"So you think I should solve the jumper?"

"Isn't that what we're here for?" I asked. "Or are we really the waste of funds the tabloids been saying we are?"

"I was just thinking maybe—"

"That's the problem," Evelyn said. "You were thinking." She

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

grabbed a water bottle. "Thanks for the refreshment," she said, and left the floor.

Bob closed his file and left too. After a moment, Hawkins shuffled off in the direction of the men's room. That left just me and Weisburg. Strangely, he had said nothing.

"You don't buy that argument, do you?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It's as good as any. I mean, we ain't never seen nothing like this. Anything could be causing it. I think maybe if Hawkins believes it's our unsolveds, then maybe he's right. If the tabloids think it's the heat, maybe they're right. If I believe maybe the city's hit its personal limit, maybe I'm right. You know, in unusual situations, you can't close your mind."

"It's not logical—"

"It's not logical for a man to choke to death on a woman's finger outside Port Authority in the presence of his very expensive dogs and not have identification on him or the animals."

"Unless it was a smuggling operation," I said.

"Shit," he said and sat up straight. I couldn't believe he hadn't thought of that.

"You see?" I said. "There's got to be a logical explanation for anything."

"The finger?" he asked. "He'd'a had to bite it off in the presence of witnesses."

"Maybe he didn't. He had dogs."

"And what, he picked it up like it was a sausage?"

"Was there bread around him, a bun maybe?" I was wondering how far I could yank him.

Apparently not that far. Weisburg winced. "You're disgusting, Spence."

"I'm just looking for logic."

"In all the wrong places," he said and stood. After grabbing his own water, he too left me alone.

For all my talk of logic, the conversation with Hawkins left me unnerved. Maybe there was something that we were missing, some tie, some reason that things had gotten so strange. Or maybe the ancients were right, and life revolves around the phases of the moon. I know my ex-wife's did. Why shouldn't a city be the same?

That morning's *Times* had some scholar saying things like this happen before every millennium. Some twerp in the *Daily News* was saying that New York had entered its own alternate timeline, a timeline parallel to the one in which Berlin had found itself more than ten years before when the Wall suddenly came down. And the guy on the street corner outside my building was yelling that we were all victims of some secret government experiment in behavior control.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Those ideas were as plausible as Weisburg's, certainly more plausible than Hawkins's, and I didn't buy any of them. We had just hit a statistical anomaly, that was all. The odds that no murders would take place couldn't be calculated accurately by looking at the entire city. Each murder was its own event, with its own probability. Or, if you wanted to look at it another way, each country had its own murder rate, and just because no one was dying by a human being's hands in New York, didn't mean it wasn't happening in L.A. or New Orleans or D.C. In fact, at that moment, I would have laid money on the idea that the national murder rate was the same as it had ever been. The murders just weren't happening here.

I didn't want to think about it. The Silence made me nervous enough as it was. Thinking about its causes made it worse.

I took a sip of that delicious cool water that Hawkins had tried to bribe us with, and then I realized what I had missed earlier. I picked up the phone and called the super for Glisando's building.

"You said that Glisando paid her rent up to last month," I reminded the super, "but that she was never in the building. Where'd the money come from?"

"I dunno where my tenants work," the super said.

"No," I said, clarifying. "Where did she send the checks from?"

"Upstate," the super said. "Her parents' farm."

Normally, I don't like to leave the city, but in that August's record heat wave, I was glad to leave the island of smog and tall buildings for the fresher and somewhat cooler air upstate.

Glisando's parents had what might once have been a working farm, but what was now called a farm only out of tradition. The house had been restored by some *Architectural Digest* wannabe, and the barn had been remade into a guesthouse more beautifully apportioned than most of Manhattan's hotels. I pulled up in the clearly regraveled driveway, probably kept that way for "authenticity," and headed straight for the barn, which was where some folks in the nearby town had told me I'd find Glisando.

They weren't lying. She came to the door barefoot, her hair gone and her face so skeletal and covered with melanoma that it was clear she was dying. Mom and Dad, apparently, had decided to take her in and give her what little comfort they could in her last year of life.

"I'm sorry," I said, after I'd introduced myself. "If I'd known I wouldn't have bothered you with this."

Glisando shrugged a bony shoulder as if to say that questions like mine no longer mattered. She motioned me into the coolness of the barn and its lovely central air, and led me into the living room. The chairs were leather, obviously part of the decor, but

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

someone had put in a ratty fabric sofa, on which was an Amish quilt. Dolls decorated all the surfaces. The television was still playing directly in front of the sofa, and as we went into the room, Glisando grabbed the remote and shut the set off.

"No one's ever talked to me about Joel," she said as she sat on the couch and wrapped the quilt around herself. "At least, not officially."

"According to your super and your employer, you disappeared right after the killing."

Glisando laughed. It had the empty quality of a once-hearty chuckle; she didn't seem to have the energy to go full strength. "I hadn't disappeared at all. My doctor's in the city, and I kept using the apartment off and on until last month. I just stopped going to work. I couldn't. Not after Joel died."

"You were evicted, did you know that?" I asked. "Your landlord sold all your things."

"Joel's things," Glisando said, and she didn't sound sad. "I hadn't the strength to move them."

"Why didn't your parents help you move?"

Her smile was small. "They didn't even know where I was until I showed up here in March. I didn't want them to see how I'd been living."

"So Joel had AIDS."

Glisando shook her head. "He was one of the lucky ones. He never got infected, no matter how many times he was exposed. He was a carrier only. A researcher was going to use him as a test subject and then—" Her lower lip trembled and she stopped, swallowing hard.

"It must have been hard to lose his things."

Glisando looked at the dolls, then back at me. "Do you ever feel watched, Detective?"

"No," I said.

"I do. These are Joel's. It's like they see right through me." She coughed, then pulled the blanket tighter.

"What do they see?" I asked.

"I was so angry at him."

I felt the hair on the back of my neck rise.

"He didn't get sick and I did, and when we found out, I thought it wasn't fair. Why did he get to live and I didn't?"

I waited. I threaded my fingers together, wondering in this time of strangeness if something even stranger would happen: a confession.

"And then we had that cold spell, remember? So cold that the air felt brittle."

I did remember. It had been a memorable weather year.

"He didn't come home. They said on the news there had been a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

rash of killings that night. Like a full moon. Everyone had gone berserk."

I nodded. Most were easily solved. Husbands killing wives, wives killing husbands. A video-store clerk shooting a client who looked like he was pulling a gun from his jacket when actually he had been trying to return a tape.

"My father—" Glisando shivered slightly when she mentioned her father—"he's into weather. He said that those kinds of killings usually happen only in hot weather. But now the papers say there's been no killing at all."

A response felt appropriate here. I tried to keep it short. "We have had a reprieve."

"So you can investigate old cases."

"Yes."

She closed her eyes, leaned back. "I don't remember that night. God's truth. I woke up unable to remember going to bed."

I waited.

She swallowed. "But positioning the dolls." She opened her eyes. "It was something he used to do for me after I got sick. Only they didn't make me better."

There was fear in her eyes, fear I didn't dare assuage. She said nothing more. Finally, I said, as carefully as I could, "You know that makes you a suspect."

"To everyone," she said. "Including myself."

In the end, I didn't take her in. I thought about it, but I needed to back up my suspicions with physical evidence, and I wasn't sure I was up to the task. Not in this case. Because once I'd seen Glisando, I realized that whatever I did wouldn't really matter. She would die a horrible death. I'd find another case to pursue, something easier, something that would convince the captain that the task force still had it, that we could still solve the old cases. It wasn't time to disband us yet.

I thought about all that on the drive back to the city. The light over Manhattan was hazy and thick, and as I drove into it, I felt as if I were driving into soup. I went to the precinct, thinking that I would type up my notes and then double-check forensics in the morning.

When I got in, I discovered Weisburg at his desk, hands in his hair. Bob was packing up, heading home for the evening. Hawkins, apparently, hadn't returned. Evelyn was following a lead.

I didn't say much to Bob or Weisburg. I started typing my notes, unable to shake the uncomfortable feeling in my stomach.

Here's what I know: I know that anyone can kill, given the right circumstances. I know that we all have it in us; it's bred into the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

genetic code. We do it when we're threatened, when we need to survive, when we need food. There are sick people whose genes are malfunctioning, guys like Speck and Dahmer, who like to kill for the hell of it. And some folks, well, the civility gets trained out of them, and they become soldiers for hire, assassins, or worse. And then there's the folks who kill accidentally, at least the first time: They're beating their wife or their boyfriend, and the whole thing gets out of hand. The death wasn't planned. It was, literally, a crime of passion.

Killers. They all have a look, and you learn to recognize it when you've been in the business as long as I have. Folks who've killed to survive never think of it again. Or, if they have a finely tuned conscience, they spend lots of money on therapy or booze, but at first glance, you can't tell them from you or me.

Then there's the sick ones so clearly abnormal that you can feel it when you come into a room. I was never sure how they lured their victims. Maybe those folks had poor survival skills or were good at denial or simply didn't have the time to defend themselves. I always bet on the latter, that twisting feeling in the stomach when you realize you've made a mistake and there's no way out.

And then, finally, there's the crime-of-passion folks. Most of them don't meet your eyes. Most of them, they carry this little thread of guilt in them, and if you look hard enough, you see it: in their posture, in their gestures, in the way they look away at the very last moment, the deep moment, when you can really see inside someone's soul.

Glisando wasn't a Speck or a Dahmer, and she didn't look like a person who had killed to survive. In fact, it was hard to believe that, even a few months before, she'd had the strength to kill anyone. Oh, she said the right things; that comment about the dolls was close, but it was what she said later, about suspecting herself. No guilty person would ever give that much, dying or not. She had the guilt, but it was the guilt of a person who'd thought of killing another and then that other died. It wasn't the guilt of someone who'd actually committed the act. Glisando really and truly didn't remember, and it tore her up.

It was bothering me, too. It just didn't fit, somehow.

Nothing did. Nothing seemed to work the way I understood it at all anymore.

The next morning I arrived at the House late, deciding to treat myself to coffee at an expensive restaurant just so that I could cool down. As I walked upstairs, I heard raucous laughter accompanied by someone pounding on a desk.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I came in to see Evelyn playing the desk like a tom-tom and laughing as she did so. The others were crowded around her.

When she saw me, she stood up and grinned. "Pay up," she said.

"You solved it?"

She nodded. "Kid named Jack Davis was the shooter, and he came clean the moment I found him. He was hired by the husband to kill the wife. Which he did. The problem was, the family dog attacked in the middle of the shooting, so he had to shoot the dog too. Tore the kid up. Seems he likes dogs. But being the little psycho that he is, he blamed the husband for making him shoot the dog. And he knew better than to shoot the husband too, so he started leaving clues all over the city. First thing he said when I brought him in was, 'Shit, bitch, I was beginning to think I needed a friggin' neon sign.'"

I laughed like I was supposed to, but it made me uncomfortable. "Contract killers usually don't advertise," I said.

"The kid's a flake," she said. "But even he admitted his behavior was a bit strange, although he attributed it to something else. He said he never missed. He shoulda been able to shoot the wife and leave the damn dog alone."

I turned to Hawkins. "I thought you were going to be first."

"Arm matched," he snapped. "Hand was missing."

"Does this mean the rest of us give our cases to Evelyn?" Bob asked.

Weisburg shook his head. "We said a week."

"You guys at least owe me a round," she said.

"Seems like a round is small payoff for solving that one," Bob said.

"We didn't agree to a round," Hawkins said. He stood. "I'm near closing too. I got one more lead to follow."

He hurried out the door. Evelyn's grin widened. "Touchy, touchy."

"He hates to lose," Weisburg said.

"He should be used to it by now," I said.

"Hell, I think that's the problem. He's always losing," Bob said. "At least on the things that count."

"Excuse me." The voice came from the stairs. A middle-aged couple stood there. The wife had artificially blond hair that didn't match her sun-wrinkled face, and the husband had his arm around her protectively. "We're here to see Detective Gray."

"That's me," I said. The group silenced behind me and went to their desks. "How can I help you?"

The man looked at the woman. He cleared his throat. "I'm Nic Glisando, and this is my wife Anne."

I didn't let the surprise I felt show on my face. "Let's go somewhere private," I said.

I took them to one of the interview rooms and closed the door. They remained standing, as if the place were disgusting to them,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and it probably was. Glisando's polo shirt had a designer label and his wife's hands were covered in jewelry worth more than I'd earn in the next fifteen years.

"We're Melanie's parents," Mrs. Glisando said, as if I hadn't already put that together. "She told us you'd been to see her."

"Yes," I said, not sure how this related to me. I hadn't taken Glisando into custody, and I wasn't planning to. But the parents were clearly frightened.

"When I heard that, I told my husband Nic that he had to talk to you." She turned to him. "Nicky. Please."

Glisando wiped his hands on his trousers, then glanced at the tape recorder in the center of the table. "That's not on, is it?"

"No," I said. My heart was pounding. I didn't know what I had stumbled into.

"What I have to tell you is in the strictest confidence. I could get fired for revealing this to anyone."

This was good. I pointed to the chairs. The wife sat, and then her husband. I sat too. "I'm not really in the business of keeping confidences."

"If I tell you something, and I give you documentation, will you promise me you won't say where it came from?"

"Why would you do this?" I asked.

"So that you don't charge my girl. She's dying as it is." Glisando said that as if he'd had practice, but his wife looked down. They traded strengths in this family.

I sat still for a moment, thinking. Then what Glisando said registered with me. The parents thought that my charging Melanie with Dudich's murder was a foregone conclusion.

I sighed. I had already made up my mind about Glisando. She wouldn't be killing anyone else, not in her condition, and what she had already done would soon be taken up between her and her maker. I didn't have to tell these folks that, of course, but I didn't have to leave them hang either.

"Tell you what," I said. "If I think the information you have is compelling, I won't charge your daughter."

"And you won't tell anyone where you got this?"

"No."

Glisando nodded and then handed me a computer disk.

I took it and slapped it against my palm. "You want to tell me what's on it?"

His eyes met mine. They were a pale blue, almost clear, and the whites around them were lined with red. "I used to work at Columbia. Meteorology. Then I got hired by—"

"Nic," his wife said warningly. He nodded to her.

"—I got hired by a private company that has a defense contract.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

We've been working on this project for years, but we've been doing field work since January."

I waited. I didn't see how this fit in.

"Experimenting. In Manhattan." He stopped then, as if I should understand. I didn't.

"How does this relate to Melanie?" I asked.

"No one's been murdered in the city in three weeks."

"Yes," I said.

"It's the heat."

"Beg pardon," I said, "usually heat causes people to go crazy, not to stop going crazy."

"I know," Glisando said. "But we've been studying the effect of weather on the human killing impulse."

"It's a defense contract," his wife said softly, as if I hadn't heard it the first time. It was all I could do not to snap at her. She apparently thought public servants didn't have the intelligence of a gnat.

"As a rule, human beings don't kill each other when the temperature goes below zero," Glisando was saying, "even if they can't leave the house for days. It just doesn't happen. But if the mercury is above ninety degrees for a long time, murder rates climb. We thought if we could isolate the impulse, we could negate it."

"We?"

"We," he said. "I can't go into all of this. I don't understand much of it myself. I was there to be the forecaster, and the predictor, and to help develop computer models on weather patterns. But to make a long story short, we thought we'd isolated the impulse—we had in lesser mammals—so we field-tested on Manhattan."

That woke me up. "Manhattan?"

He nodded. "It's an island, which means it's controllable, and it's got fairly predictable weather patterns. We knew, for example, there'd be a long heat spell this summer. We just didn't know when."

"So you're not causing the heat?"

He laughed, a mirthless sound that was more a reaction to my ignorance than any amusement on his part. "No. Of course not."

"You're causing the murder rate to go down?"

"Actually, my colleagues are. They're biologists and psychologists. I simply worked on the weather aspects of it." He'd said that already. I just hadn't understood it before. Maybe I did need Mrs. Glisando as an interpreter.

"And they do this through—?"

"A combination of chemicals and hormones that have to do with the brain. I don't understand much of this myself, but it's on the disk."

"So they're spraying the city with some kind of chemical?"

"It's not that simple, Detective," he said. "Like I said, it's on the disk."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"The disk is in my hand, not the computer. You can explain it to me."

Glisando shook his head. "I'm not here to talk science. I want to get my daughter cleared."

The man was loony, and his wife wasn't much better. I wanted them out of the precinct. I wanted the case closed.

"In order to clear her, you have to tell me how all this science is relevant," I said.

Glisando glanced at his wife. "We had to test our theory," he said, "in all kinds of weather. Take the fourteenth of February, for example."

The night Dudich had died. The night of the cold spell. The night of all the homicides. I remembered that even before Melanie Glisando had mentioned it to me.

"We had to see if we could make people behave contrary to our assumptions," Glisando said.

"People don't usually kill on cold nights," his wife said, as if I hadn't understood.

I had. I was just in shock. I couldn't believe they'd haul this out to protect their daughter. I couldn't believe anyone would believe I'd believe this.

"If what you're saying is true," I said slowly, "then all the deaths in the city that night could be laid on your doorstep."

"The company's," he said, as if he'd already thought of that.

"And the government's."

He shrugged. "They said it all balances. No one's been dying all summer."

I stared at them. They stared at me. I had nothing to say to them. If his theory was true, then this was something as big as the atomic-bomb tests with human guinea pigs at ground zero, the ones that happened in the fifties. If it wasn't true, it was the strangest story I'd ever heard anyone make up to get someone else off the hook.

And The Silence lent just enough credence to it. More than enough.

There were butterflies in my stomach.

It was my turn to clear my throat. I did, and swallowed hard. "So your program works," I said, trying to keep my voice calm. "And since it does, is it going to spread from city to city? Are you going to cover the countryside with this—chemical?"

He shook his head. "It didn't work."

I frowned. "You just said it did work. No one died."

"But the violence continues. That's what we missed. We didn't change people's basic nature. We just muted it."

"Or made it quirkier," I said, thinking not of this heat wave and The Silence, but of all the bizarre deaths all winter long.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

His wife bowed her head. He closed his eyes and turned away from me. I waited, but that last shut them up. They seemed to have nothing more to say.

"I'm keeping the disk," I said finally.

Glisando turned back to me. "Illness makes people think irrational thoughts."

"And drugs make them act on it," I said. "That's never really been an excuse before."

I don't remember that night, Melanie Glisando had said to me. *God's truth. I woke up unable to remember going to bed.*

God, I was in the wrong place to hear this conversation. Too many strange things had happened. Too many strange things were still happening.

"I'm not going to charge Melanie," I said. I stood and opened the door. "But that's only because I can't do anything worse to her than is already being done."

"She's not a bad person," Mrs. Glisando said.

I turned to her. "Let's say for a moment that I believe your husband. Let's say that he did something to this city to make the murder rate climb in cold weather. Whatever he did wasn't one hundred percent effective, or we'd all be dead. It only allowed those with a predisposition to murder to commit the act."

Glisando shook his head. "You don't understand," he said.

I looked at him. "Yes," I said. "I'm afraid I do."

That night, I watched the weather on television. The first hurricane of the season was blowing up from the Carolinas, and the heat wave, so stifling and oppressive, was at an end. I kept my windows open and, sure enough, about 3 A.M., the wind howled through the building canyons and the rain pelted the streets and the air got cool.

Blissfully cool.

That morning, a man jogging despite the rain (or maybe because of it) through Central Park was mugged and beaten to death. A drug runner for one of the local gangs was shot on 42nd Street, and a broker was found strangled near the Exchange. By the time I got up, the news was already blaring on the radio.

The Silence was over.

Within days our caseload filled back up. But that didn't stop Bob from finding the evidence he needed to pin the murder of the neighbor on the husband and wife. Nor did it stop Weisburg from identifying the man who'd swallowed the finger as the head of a smuggling ring that had double-crossed the mob. The finger still had prints, and it belonged to the man's wife, who was alive and willing to talk if she was sent to witness protection.

Only Hawkins didn't solve his crime, which was no surprise. It's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

hard to make a case with just a torso and part of an arm for evidence. All the other body parts floating around the city didn't match.

The team thought I'd failed too, and I let them. I didn't say anything about Glisando or her nutty parents, at least not to the other wagerers. I did some double-checking, found out where Nic Glisando worked, found out, too, that he'd been there all night the night Dudich had been murdered. So Nic Glisando hadn't killed his daughter's lover, and neither had the wife. She'd been out of the country, visiting relatives in Europe.

Maybe it was that news that made me make three copies of the disk on the department's computer. Or maybe it was my innate caution. I gave one copy to my captain and the second to the *Daily News*. The *Daily News* apparently read the disk and printed the speculation that Glisando had laid on me, but by then, The Silence was long forgotten. The story ended up on page ten, bottom, a two-inch column that no one seemed to notice.

My captain thought the information on the disk as strange as I did and wrote it off to the flakiness some people could exhibit when under stress.

That's what I told myself too. But I keep the third copy of that disk in my desk and the original in a safety-deposit box because I'm as superstitious as the next guy. Maybe more so. And I'm keeping a graph now too. On one line is the ambient temperature in Manhattan, on the other, the number of homicides. I tell you, if things start looking strange, or we get some more Silence, I'm marching up to that farm upstate and getting more information, like what the government is really going to do with the knowledge if the experiments succeed.

What I'll do with that information, I haven't a clue. And at this moment, it's not really an issue. Things are back to normal. I'm overworked, overloaded, and suffering from stress. When a car backfires, I duck like I always have, knowing that random gunshots are happening again, and that people are dying at the hands of other people, just like they have from the time Cain had it in for his hapless brother Abel.

Hard to believe, even for myself, that I'm praying there won't be another Silence. Statistics experts say there won't, that this was just one of those anomalies that happen from time to time, something strange for the record books. The religious nuts blame the millennium, as they always do, and the change back to man's inherent evil nature. The alternate-timeline folks say that we'd been in a bubble, and now we're back on track.

I like those ideas a lot better than Glisando's. Glisando's means that human mind-control is possible, and that would put people like me, people who know but aren't affected, under an obligation to stop whatever's going on. And I don't like moral conundrums

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

like that. I don't want my mind controlled any more than the next guy, but I also don't want the guy next to me to haul out his daddy's hunting knife and carve me into Sunday dinner because he's sick of sweating too much for the eighth day in a row.

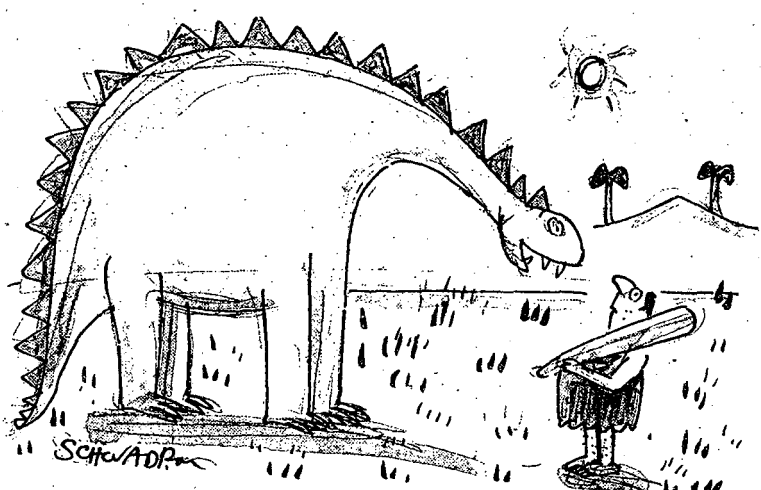
So far my chart has shown nothing, and I doubt it ever will. People will say anything when their kid's dying, and could be up for murder at the same time. People'll say anything.

But what crosses my mind, usually at night, usually before I fall asleep, is that little thread of guilt that showed itself in Nic Glisando's face every time he frowned, the way he wouldn't quite look at me, the way he protected his soul. I believe his daughter killed Joel Dudich. Glisando believes it, too. Only he thinks that she did it because he was working on some strange government experiment.

I think she did it because, at home, she'd never learned how to take responsibility for herself.

The Silence was one of the strangest things I've ever seen on the job. But, you know, it wasn't the strangest. Because in our ice-blue files, there are a million things that one human being has done to another for reasons only those two people fathom, and maybe not even they do. And we're just supposed to solve cases; we're not supposed to understand them.

That's the hardest thing of all, realizing, when you come down to it, that every human being is a mystery to others. Maybe people like Glisando believe someday they'll find a way to make people do whatever they want. But I just don't believe it. ●



"Do you contain saturated or unsaturated body fat?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rumpole and the Actor Laddie

by John Mortimer

John Mortimer's most famous character, Rumpole of the Bailey, is back this month in another splendid courtroom outing. Hindered by a client he can't control, Rumpole nevertheless brings all his powers to bear on behalf of the defense. The first Rumpole cases were teleplays, produced in the early 1970s. Rumpole has retained his verve for nearly thirty years and we heartily hope he'll be entertaining our readers for decades to come. †

"Mr. Rumpole. Your timing! My dear, it's something to die for. And the hand gestures! So telling. That wonderful sniff of contempt, just the way Larry used to do it in *The Merchant.* Of course, I've only had the opportunity of seeing your perf from the gods, the public gallery, that is, at the Old Bailey. And I don't believe you saw the last thing I did. My Adam the gardener in *As You* with the Clithero Mummers. A small part, of course, but I think I made a little jewel of it. That was in 'eighty-four, or was it 'eighty-five? It's difficult to get cast when you're not young and you're definitely not prepared to take your clothes off. That's why I'm thrilled that we're working together at last. I've dreamed and dreamed, I promise you, my dear, of playing opposite the great Rumpole of the Bailey!"

Was my timing so good? Quite honestly, I had never thought about it. And yet I was half pleased to get a tribute from the client who had told me at the outset that he was "in the business," and when I asked what business that might be, he had given a light laugh and said, "A poor player, an honour I share with Garrick and Irving and the late, great Sir Donald Wolfit. My crown is a little tarnished now, but some old theatregoers won't easily forget my Benvolio, my French Ambassador, above all my Rosencrantz in

©2000 by John Mortimer

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Danish play. I have, it's true, been resting for, well, to be honest with you, getting on for quite a while, which is why I'm so looking forward to our forthcoming engagement. I know I haven't lost the trick of holding an audience. I just hope I won't have trouble remembering 'the lines.' I fear I'm no longer the quick study I was."

The elderly man, talking with the volubility of someone emerging from years of silence, had a pink face, a monkish fringe of grey hair, and the appearance of an elderly cherub run to fat. He wore a light grey suit strained at the buttons, suede shoes, and a bright pink tie. A voluminous silk handkerchief billowed from his breast pocket and he smelt of some pungently seductive *eau de toilette.* His name, inscribed on my brief, was Percival Delabere, and the venue in which we were to perform together was, I am sorry to say, the London Sessions, where Percival was engaged to play the lead on a fairly ordinary charge of theft.

When he was no longer, as he would say, "in demand" as an actor, Percy Delabere ("Call me Percy, dear boy. Johnny G. and Dame Edith always did.") eked out his living on a small income left to him by an aunt and occasional speech lessons to puzzled West Indians or Spanish waiters who wanted to talk in the singsong tones of the long-dead actor-managers. He was able to afford a bed-sitting room on the top floor of a crumbling Victorian house in Talbot Square near to Paddington Station. This undesirable residence was the property of a Miss Hunter, a large, untidy woman, a solitary gin drinker whose quarters and financial affairs were in a perpetual muddle. She fussed over her younger, more attractive tenants and took only a perfunctory interest in the fading career of the old actor on the top floor.

The circumstances which led to our meeting, and his complimentary remarks about my perf, in the conference room at the London Sessions, were unfortunate. During his long rests it was Percy's practice to wander about the house going into other people's rooms in order to bore them with reminiscences of Larry, John G., and the great Sir Donald Wolfit. On the afternoon in question, Miss Hunter had wandered round to the off-license and left her door open. It was agreed that Percy had popped into her room to pay his rent and, apparently for want of anything better to do, had examined some items of the landlady's jewellery which she had left in a jumble of possessions on a marble-topped table under a tarnished mirror. A Mr. Crookshank, a retired insurance salesman, had passed Miss Hunter's open door and seen Percy slip her most valued possession, a diamond and emerald ring, onto one podgy finger and stand admiring the effect of it in the looking glass. Later, Miss Hunter announced the ring missing, and Percy made a considerable investment in new pink shirts, a silk dress-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing gown, and a purple, spotted bow tie from a posh shop in Jermyn Street.

"How did you afford all that?" I asked Percival.

"Poor as I am, Mr. Rumpole, I had made savings. And one must keep up appearances. That is, *very* important. You never get offered anything if you don't keep up appearances."

I thought that producers would hardly be hurrying to Percival's door on the hot news that he had bought a new dressing gown, but I didn't say so. Instead I came to the very heart, the nub of the matter. "I suppose you'd better tell me now. Did you take the landlady's ring?"

"Mr. Rumpole." There followed a long pause, which, although no doubt meant to be dramatic, soon became tedious. And then, "Do you really have such a low view of my profession?"

Ignoring the fact that he seemed to find no appreciable difference between the bar and the stage, I did my best to focus the man's attention. "That's a question you'll have to answer 'Yes' or 'No' soon."

"Not now, Mr. Rumpole." He held up a warning hand, "I shall tell the full story when I enter the witness box."

"You'd better not enter it until I know what you're going to say."

"My dear! Would you deny me the witness box? Am I to be a mere extra, a super, a spear-carrier with no lines? My crown may be a little tarnished now, but I think you can rely on me to play the lead. I promise I shall not disappoint."

"You'll go into the witness box over my dead body," was what I should have said, but I weakly agreed to call him. How could I deny the old actor landing the only leading role he was now likely to get?

I did say, "I assume you'd deny keeping the ring?"

"Mr. Rumpole. It's for you to make the assumptions. It's for me to play the lead. To the best of my poor ability." And that is, of course, exactly what he did.

"Mr. Rumpole. Can't you control your client?"

"I'm afraid, Your Honour, that is quite impossible."

Why had I ever allowed Percival to take centre stage? We were a quarter of an hour into his evidence, he was in full flow, and His Honour Judge Archibald, "Artful Archie" to his many detractors owing to his many ingenious ways of persuading juries to convict, was clearly in the throes of terminal irritation.

The trial had started quietly. Miss Hunter, voluminous and somewhat confused, told the story of the missing ring which Mr. Crookshank had last seen on Percy's finger. And then Percy had gone into the witness box and taken the oath in the hushed tones of the Prince of Denmark addressing his father's ghost. After a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

few routine questions he ignored me and became Mark Antony orating to the Roman plebs.

"My friends and fellow countrymen on the jury." His voice was low and throbbing. "May I take a moment of your time to speak of my all too humble self? I am a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, in my case this witness box, and then, perhaps to your relief, will be heard no more. I have lived, it is no exaggeration to say, for my art. I have done my poor best to dedicate myself to that perpetual challenge which is the theatre. I have sung with Shakespeare and argued with Shaw and, yes, I am not ashamed to confess it, on occasions lost my trousers with Ray Cooney." Here he waited for a laugh which never came. "Such a career teaches passion. It teaches love of the language. What it cannot teach is sensible behaviour and self-restraint. . . ."

After a good deal more in the same vein, Artful Archie, having made his irritated interjection, attempted to drag the wandering thespian back to the point at issue. So I put the question to him bluntly:

"Mr. Delabere. Do you agree that you put Miss Hunter's ring on your own finger and surveyed the effect in the mirror?"

"Members of the jury. You will remember the line in the Moorish play—I mean *Othello*—about the base Indian who threw a pearl away, richer than all his tribe?"

"Mr. Delabere!" I have to confess that the Rumpole patience, never my strongest asset, was wearing extremely thin. "Let's forget the Moorish play, the Danish play, or indeed the Scottish play for a moment and concentrate on one simple fact. Did you put Miss Hunter's ring upon your finger?"

"I imagined, for a moment, that I was playing the Doge in the Venetian play. I remembered that they wore rich jewellery."

"For the last time. Did you put on the ring or not?"

"I did."

The relief at actually getting an answer gave me confidence to move on to the next, most dangerous question. "And did you take it away with you, Mr. Delabere? Did you steal it?"

Percy treated us to one of his famous pauses, during which I held my breath and Archie sat with his pencil poised to take a note. When Percy spoke again it was to treat us to yet another oration.

"Members of the jury, I have taken the liberty of calling myself a poor player, and poor I am. It has been a constant worry to keep myself in those few necessities—a good suit, a few decent shirts, an attractive tie—which are necessary to be in the swim, to be seen and thought of as a character actor, now my juvenile days are over, who is constantly 'available.' Those who devote themselves to their art do not expect to be richly rewarded. We don't

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ask for yachts, members of the jury, or old-master paintings, or a Rolls Royce motor car. What we, perhaps, have the right to expect is a decent standard of living which would leave us free to dream, to create, to study, and, when in work, do our job without the haunting fear of future poverty. So what am I saying? Did I steal the ring? Yes. I stole the ring. I announce it publicly! I announce it proudly. Miss Hunter has boxes of jewellery, most of which she never wears. You have seen her, her fingers are glittering, her neck is loaded with semiprecious trinkets. That ring, members of the jury, is the tribute the property owner pays to the artist. Judge me if you will. Call me guilty if you must. But don't deny me your understanding or your mercy, which like the fairness of the Almighty, transcends all human laws."

At which point, I promise you, Percy Delabere clung to the front of the witness box and bowed as though acknowledging the wildest applause after the most exhausting performance. The jury sat in stolid silence and the only voice heard was that of Artful Archie, who sounded content that my client had convicted himself without needing any assistance from the learned judge.

"Mr. Rumpole, I imagine you will now advise your client to change his plea."

"I see it's nearly one o'clock." I decided to play for time. "Perhaps I might take his instructions during the lunchtime adjournment?"

"Very well. But in view of what he has now told us, I must cancel his bail. Delabere will be taken down to the cells. Back here at two o'clock, members of the jury."

Confronting the actor laddie in the cells before having a drink would have been like having an operation without an anaesthetic, and I decided against it. I ordered a pint of Guinness in the pub across the road and was about to consume it with a slice of pork pie and pickle, when "Spider" Wilkinson, the counsel for the prosecution, so-called because of his thin arms and legs which seemed to stretch out in all directions and his solemn, bespectacled face, came in and greeted me with, "Rumpole! You lucky bastard!"

"Lucky? To have a client who is so clean off his head that he makes a totally unnecessary confession to the jury in a performance of such unutterable ham that I blushed to hear it? Do you know that idiotic old actor complimented me on my timing! His timing was perfectly judged to get him a long rest in Wormwood Scrubs."

"Did you think you could get him off?"

"We had a chance. There was no evidence he actually sold the ring, or even kept it."

"He didn't."

"What do you mean?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

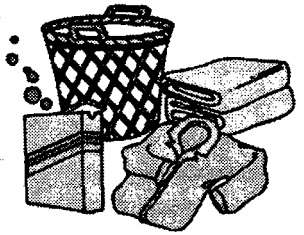
"Just that! Dear old Miss Hunter searched through her handbag, apparently a lengthy undertaking, late this morning and found a receipt from a jeweller. She'd taken the ring in to be repaired long after your client tried it on. We rang the shop and it's still there. When we go back I'll have to tell Archie. He's not going to like it."

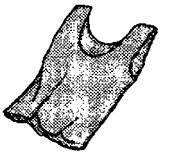
Strangely enough, when I brought the good news to Percy, he also seemed disappointed. When I asked him why on earth he'd shopped himself to the jury I could make no sense of his reply. "It seemed right somehow, Mr. Rumpole. The perfect dramatic ending to what I flatter myself was a moving speech powerfully performed. I stood before them, I thought, a heroic victim and not a foolish old actor who tries rings on for fun. I think it was my finest performance."

I left Percy Delabere then, having resolved never, under any circumstances, to work with him again. ●

"ISN'T IT A FACT YOU HAD TO PUT 911 ON YOUR SPEED DIAL."

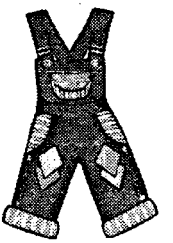
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED





Cleaning Up

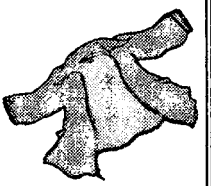
by Peggy Wysong



She popped him in the washer
And set the dial to "Hot."
That stinker was a masher,
Deserving all he got.

His change flew out of pockets
And made a tinny sound
Just like exploding rockets
As he sailed 'round and 'round.

"You're not supposed to do that,"
The policeman said, who came,
"You've melted all this poor man's fat
He'll never be the same.



"His bones have shrunk as well, you see,
He's in an awful fix.
Instead of being six-foot-three
He's only three-foot-six."

"He stalked *me* throughout this city.
I've done no wrong, and in my eyes,
He does not deserve your pity,
I simply shrank him down to size!"

Poem © 2000 by Peggy Wysong

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Confession

by Ian Rankin

"It was Tony's idea," he says, shifting in his seat. "Tony's my brother, a couple of years younger than me, but he was always the brainy one. It was all his idea. I just went along with it."

He's still trying to get comfortable. It's not easy to get comfortable in the Interview Room. The CID man could tell him that. He could tell him that the chair he's wriggling in has been modified ever so slightly, a quarter-inch taken off its front legs. The chair isn't designed with rest and relaxation in mind.

"So Tony says to me one day, he says: 'Ian, this is one plan that cannot fail.' And he tells me about it. We spend a bit of time bouncing it around, you know, me trying to pick holes in it. I have to admit, it looked pretty good. Well, that's the problem really. That's why I'm here. It was just too bloody good all round. . . ."

He looks around again, studying the walls as if expecting two-way mirrors, secret listening devices. The one thing he's not been expecting is the quietness. It's eleven-thirty on a weekday night. The police station is like a ghost town. He wants to see lots of activity, lots of uniforms. Yet again in his life, he's being let down.

Tony had noticed the slip-road. He drove from Fife to Edinburgh most Saturday nights, taking a carful of friends. They went to pubs and clubs, danced, chatted up women. A late-night pizza and maybe a couple of espressos before home. Tony didn't drink. He didn't mind staying sober while everyone around him had a skinful. He always liked to be in control. On the A90 south of the Forth Road Bridge, he'd seen the signpost for the slip-road. He'd

Ian Rankin is the author of sixteen novels, including ten in his distinguished Rebus series. He has twice won the U.K.'s Gold Dagger Award for best short story, and was shortlisted for the Anthony and Edgar awards for best short story and best novel, respectively. In 1997, Mr. Rankin capped his recent achievements with the Gold Dagger for best novel of the year. His most recent U.S. novel is *Dead Souls*, St. Martin's Press.

©2000 by Ian Rankin

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

seen it before—must've passed it a hundred times—but this one night something about it bothered him. The next morning, he headed back. The sign said: DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT VEHICLE CHECK AREA ONLY. He took the slip-road, found himself at a sort of roundabout in the middle of nowhere. He stopped his car and got out. There was grass growing in the middle of the road. He didn't think the place got used much. A hut nearby, and a metal ramp that might have been a weighbridge. Another slip-road led back down onto the A90. He stood there for a while listening to the rush of traffic below him, an idea slowly forming in his head.

"See," Ian went on, "Tony had worked for a time as a security guard, and he still had a couple of uniforms hanging in his wardrobe. He's always had the idea of robbing someplace, always knew those uniforms would come in handy. One of his pals, guy called Malc, he works—I should say worked—in a printing shop. So Tony brought Malc in, said we could trust him. Have you got a cigarette?"

The detective points to the No Smoking sign, but then relents, hands over a packet of ten and some matches.

"Thanks. So you see," lighting up, exhaling noisily, "it was all Tony's idea, and Malc had a certain expertise, too. I didn't have anything. It was just that I was family, so Tony knew he could trust me. I haven't worked in eight years. Used to be in heavy engineering up in Leven, got laid off in the slump. If somebody could do something about the manufacturing industry in this country, there'd be a lot less crime. Bit of advice there, free of charge." He flicks ash into the ashtray, brushes some stray flecks from his trousers. "I'm not saying I didn't play a part. Obviously, I wouldn't be here otherwise. I just want it on record that I wasn't the brains of the operation."

"I think I can go along with that," the detective says. Ian asks him if he shouldn't be taking notes or something. "We're trained, lad. Elephant's memory."

So Ian nods, goes on with his story. The interview room is small and airless. It carries the aromas of every person who's ever been through it, all of them telling their stories. A few of them even turning out to be true . . .

"So we make a few recces, and never once do we see the place being used. We stopped the car on the slip-road a few nights. Plenty of lorries steaming past, but nobody so much as notices us or asks what we're up to. This is what Tony wanted to know. We set the thing up for last Wednesday."

"Why a Wednesday?" the detective asks.

Ian just shrugs. "Tony's idea," he says. "All I did was go along with him. He was the mastermind: That's the word I've been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wanting. Mastermind." He shifts again in his chair, stares at the walls again, remembering Wednesday night.

Tony and Ian were dressed in the uniforms. Tony had a friend with a haulage truck. It had been easy to borrow it for the night. The story was, they were helping someone move house. Malc had come up with IDs for them: They'd had their photos taken at a passport booth, and the laminated cards, each in its own wallet, looked authentic. They took the truck up to the roundabout, left the car near the bottom of the slip-road. Malc was dressed in a leather jacket and baseball cap. He was supposed to be a truck driver. Tony would head back down the ramp and use a torch to signal a lorry onto the slip-road. Then he'd ask the driver to go to the test area, where Ian would be apparently interviewing another lorry driver. This was so the real driver wouldn't suspect anything.

"It worked," Ian says. "That's what's so unbelievable. First lorry he stopped, the driver brought it up to the roundabout, stopped it, and got out. Tony comes driving up, gets out of his car. Asks to see the delivery note, then says he wants to check the cargo."

The detective has a question. "What if it turned out to be cabbages or fish or something?"

"First thing Tony asked was what he was carrying. If it had been something we couldn't sell, he'd have let him go. But we came up gold at the first attempt. Washing machines, two dozen of them at three-hundred quid apiece. Only problem was, by the time we'd squeezed them into our own lorry, we'd no room for anything else, and we were cream-crackered anyway. Otherwise, I think we could have kept going all night." Ian pauses. "You're wondering about the driver, aren't you? There were three of us, remember. All we did was tie him up, leave him in his cab. We knew he'd get himself free eventually. Quiet up there; we didn't want him starving to death. And off we went with the haul. We had about fifteen of the machines and were already thinking of who we could sell them to. Storage was no problem. Tony has a couple of lockups. We left them there. There's a local villain, name of Andy Horrigan. He runs a couple of pubs and cafes, so I thought maybe he'd be in the market. We were being careful, see. Once the news was out that someone had boosted a consignment of washer-dryers . . . well, we had to be careful who we sold to." He pauses. "Only, we'd already made that one fatal mistake. . . ."

One mistake. He asks for another cigarette. His hand is shaking as he lights it. He can't get it out of his head, the insane bad luck of it. Even before he'd had a chance to say anything to Andy Horrigan, Horrigan had something to ask him.

"Here, Ian, heard anything about a heist? Washer-dryers, nicked from the back of a lorry?"

"I didn't see anything in the papers," Ian had replied. Quite hon-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

estly, too: It had surprised them, the way there had been nothing in the press or on radio and TV. Ian could see Horrigan was bursting to tell him. He knew right away it couldn't be good news, not coming from Horrigan.

"It wasn't in the papers, never will be neither."

And as he'd gone on to explain it, Ian had felt his life ebb away. He'd run to the lockup, finding Tony there. Tony already knew: It was written on his face. He knew they had to get rid of the machines, dump them somewhere. But that meant getting another lorry from somewhere.

"Hang on, though," Tony had said, his brain slipping into gear. "Eddie Hart isn't after the machines, is he? He only wants what's his."

Eddie Hart: At mention of the name, Ian could feel his knees buckling. "Steady Eddie" was the Dundee Godfather, a man with an almost mythical status as mover and shaker, entrepreneur, and hammer-wielding maniac. If you crossed Steady Eddie, he got out his carpentry nails. And according to the local word, Eddie was absolutely furious.

He'd probably put a lot of thought into the scheme. He needed to move drugs around, and had hit on the idea of hiding them inside white goods. After all, a lorryload of washer-dryers or fridge-freezers—they could saunter up and down every motorway in the country. All you needed were some fake dockets listing origin and destination. It just so happened that Tony had hit on one of Eddie's drivers. And now Eddie was out for blood.

But Tony was right: If they handed back the dope, got it back to Eddie somehow, maybe they'd be allowed to live. Maybe it would be all right. So they started tearing the packing from the machines, unscrewing the back of each to search behind the drum for hidden packages. And when that failed, they emptied out each machine's complimentary packet of washing powder. They went through both lockups, they checked and double-checked every machine. And found nothing.

Ian thought maybe the stuff had been hidden in one of the machines they'd left behind.

"Use your loaf," his brother told him. "If that were true, why would he be after us? Wait a minute, though . . ."

And he went back, counting the machines. There was one missing. The brothers looked at one another, headed for Tony's car. At Malc's mother's house, Malc had just plumbed the machine in. The old twin-tub was out on the front path, waiting to be junked. Malc's mother was rubbing her hands over the front of her new washer-dryer, telling the neighbours who'd gathered in the kitchen what a good laddie her son was.

"Saved up and bought it as a surprise."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Even Ian knew that they were in real trouble now. Everyone in town would get to hear about the new washing-machine . . . and word would most definitely travel.

They took Malc outside, explained the situation to him. He went back indoors and manoeuvered the machine out of its cubbyhole, explaining that he'd forgotten to remove the transit bolts. His hands were trembling so much, he kept dropping the screwdriver. But at last he had the back of the machine off and started handing brown-paper packages to Tony and Ian. Tony explained to the neighbours that they were weights, to stop the machine slipping and sliding when it was in the back of the lorry.

"Like bricks?" one neighbour asked, and when he agreed with her, sweat pouring down his face, she added a further question. "Why cover bricks in brown paper?"

Tony, beyond explanations, put his head in his hands and wept.

The detective brings back two beakers of coffee, one for himself, one for Ian. He's been checking up, using the computer, making a couple of phone calls. Ian sits ready to tell him the last of it.

"We couldn't just hand the stuff back, had to think of a way to do it. So we drove up to Dundee, night before last. Steady Eddie has a nightclub. We put the stuff in one of the skips at the back of the club, then phoned the club and told them where they could find it. Thing is, the club gets its rubbish collected privately, and the company works at night. So that night, the skip got emptied. Well, that wouldn't have mattered, only . . . only it was me made the call . . . and there were two numbers in the phone book. Instead of the office, I'd got through to the public phone on the wall beside the bar. It must have been some punter who answered. I just said my piece then hung up. I don't know . . . maybe they nipped outside and got the stuff for themselves. Maybe they didn't hear me, or thought I was drunk or something. . . ." His voice is choking; he's close to tears.

"Mr. Hart didn't get the stuff?" the detective guesses. Ian nods agreement. "And now your brother and Malc have gone missing?"

"Eddie got them. He must have done."

"And you want us to protect you?"

"Witness relocation: You can do that, can't you? I mean, there's a price on my head now. You've *got* to!"

The detective nods. "We can do it," he says. "But what exactly is it you're a witness to? There's no record of a lorry being hijacked. Nobody's reported such a loss. You don't seem to have any evidence linking Mr. Hart to anything illegal—much as I'd love it if you did." The detective draws his chair closer. "It wasn't a slump that led to you losing your job, Ian. It was threatening your foreman. He didn't like your attitude, and you started spinning him

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

some story about having a brother who's a terrorist, and who'd stick a bomb under his car. You scared the poor man half to death, until he found out the truth. See, I've got all of that in the files, Ian. What I don't have is anything about washing-machines, drugs wrapped in brown paper, or missing persons."

Ian leaps from his seat, begins pacing the room. "You could send a team out to the dump. If the drugs are there, they'll find them. Or . . . or go to the lockups, the washing machines will still be there . . . unless Steady Eddie's taken them. I wouldn't put it past him. Don't you see? I'm the only one left who can testify against him!"

The detective is on his feet now, too. "I think it's time you were off, son. I'll see you as far as the door."

"I need protection!"

The detective comes up to him again. Their faces are inches apart.

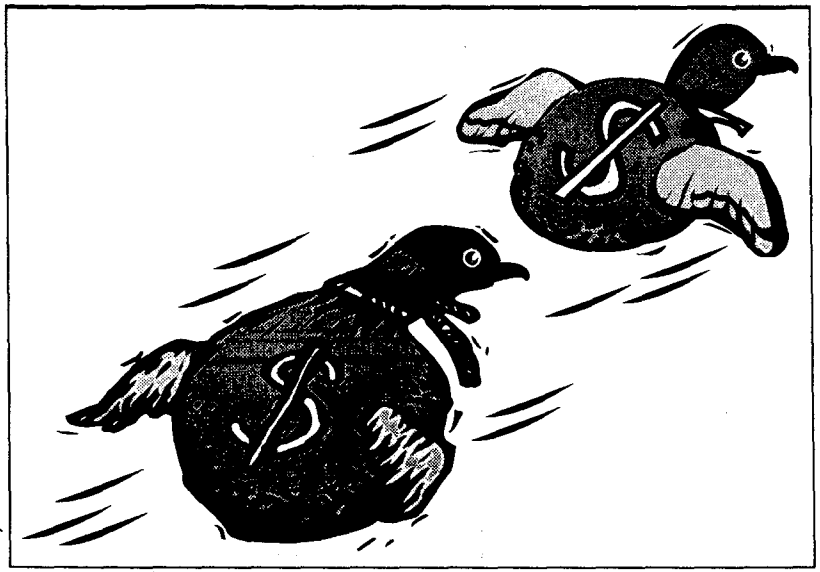
"Get your brother the terrorist to protect you. His name's . . . Billy, isn't it? Only you can't do that, can you? Because you haven't got a brother called Billy. Or a brother called Tony, if it comes to that." The detective pauses. "You haven't got *anybody,* Ian. You're a nobody. These stories of yours . . . that's all they are, stories. Come on now, it's time you were home. Your mum will be worrying."

"She got a new washing machine last week," Ian says softly. "The man who delivered it, he said sorry for being so late. He'd been stopped at a checkpoint."

It is quiet in the interview room. Quiet for a long time, until Ian begins weeping, weeping for the brother he's just lost again. ●

"I wanted my old man's number, but was told they *retired* it!

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Art by June Levine

PIGEONS

by Joseph Monninger

By the time I arrived at the Pemigewasset Bank in Plymouth, New Hampshire, the man was already on the roof, releasing the pigeons. He wore a black ninja suit, which would have been funny if the bank's alarm hadn't gone off five minutes before. I had put on the blue lights and arrived at almost the same time a state trooper named Barnes pulled in from I-93. The radio said a bank holdup. In seventeen years of work in New Hampshire, I had never encountered a bank holdup.

"Wally, what do you have?" I asked my deputy, Wally Hoyle. Wally stood next to his cruiser, a shotgun across the hood. He appeared tense. Wally had only been with the force five months. He was twenty-six. His last job was security for Ames.

"Three men in black broke in," he said, "and now they took the money and tied it to the pigeons' legs."

"They're sending off money on those birds?"

"That's right, sir."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"No, sir."

©2000 by Joseph Monninger

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I looked up at the roof. A man I hadn't seen when I first pulled in was busy banding the birds. He handed them over to the second guy. Someone was below, I figured, holding the customers and tellers hostage. The birds went off one by one, a greenback stuck to their legs. I could just make out the money. It made the birds fly with one stiff leg, but they seemed to handle it okay. The ninjas had been smart enough to post a few female citizens on the edge of the roof. We couldn't shoot at the ninjas without hitting an innocent.

"Homing pigeons?" I said to Wally.

"I guess so, sir."

"Neat," I said.

"They can't escape, sir."

"The birds or the men?"

"The men, sir."

I shrugged.

I said, "They seem to know what they're doing."

Then the birds stopped flying off the roof and I heard someone speak sharply to the citizens at the edge of the building. The citizens turned around and walked back across the roof, obviously to a staircase somewhere. The ninjas stayed in the middle of the citizens.

I walked over to the state trooper, Barnes. He was a redheaded guy and angry at the last thirty years of his life. He had his pistol drawn and had his forearm on the front of the state car, just like in the TV shows. He raised his eyebrows at me.

"Now what?" he asked me.

"Hell if I know. The money's gone."

"We got them. They're not going anywhere."

"Something tells me they don't care about getting away."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because the pigeons already got the money out of here."

I was thinking aloud, but it made sense. Before I could say anything else, five squad cars pulled in, closing off the block completely. It was the second wave. I made a motion with my hands to tell them to quiet down. But they were being GI Joes, all of

An author of nonfiction articles and books, mainstream and genre novels, and mainstream and genre short stories, Joseph Monninger returns to the pages of *EQMM* with a story that is traditional in form but typically offbeat in subject matter. Readers who'd like to sample Mr. Monninger's novel-length mysteries should look for some of the titles published by Donald I. Fine, including *Incident at Potter's Bridge*. The author's most recent book is a memoir entitled *Home Waters* (Chronicle Press).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

them clambering out of their squad cars, happy to have a chance to draw their guns. A lot of them took up positions behind their open doors, which made me laugh. Bullets go through doors all the time, I wanted to tell them.

I figured I was as close to being in charge as anyone. I went to my car and pulled the bullhorn from out of the backseat. I use the horn mostly at high-school football games for crowd control. I squawked it a couple times to get people's attention, then I directed the last three cars to go on traffic control. I told them to close off the block. I told a fourth car to go on foot and get everyone off the sidewalks. I saw the look of disappointment on the faces of the guys I had ordered onto traffic control. They were hoping for a shootout and didn't want to miss the action.

Wally called me.

"Chief, they've been patched through," he said. "The guys inside the bank. The ninjas."

"Okay," I said.

I went to Wally's cruiser. Apparently the men inside the bank had called the police station, because I heard Gloria's nervous voice when I picked up the phone. Gloria was our dispatcher. She said she had a call from the men who said they were inside the bank. I said okay, put them through. She said she would. "Chief Poulchuck?" a man's voice asked a second later.

"Yes."

"Tell your officers we have the situation well in hand. We have guns pointed at three tellers right now. Don't be stupid. We'll give you a way out of this."

"I'm listening."

"We'll call back in ten minutes with your instructions." Then he hung up. I looked around. It was a nice day for October.

An hour later nothing had happened except that a news helicopter out of Manchester had made it to the scene. It was Channel 9. It hovered over the bank, its rotors causing the trees in the town square to bend. I waved at it but it didn't back off. I told Wally to try to get to Gloria and for her to get to the helicopter. He said okay.

Then a woman walked out of the bank.

She was an older woman, sixty at least, and the back of her dress was hiked up over her rump. She looked groggy. Her hair was mussed and she appeared disoriented. Two other people, one woman and one man, came out behind her. They looked similarly disheveled.

It was an odd thing. They didn't seem worried, or distraught, or anything else. They simply stood in front of the bank, apparently

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

trying to clear their wits. Maybe it was the helicopter and the sight of so many police that made them punchy.

I went to the front door and grabbed them. But before I could make it across the area back to the cars, a few more people came out. I recognized one of the men as Forest McIver, the bank vice president. He held the door open. Other people came out.

"There's no one in there," Forest said to me, shouting over the noise of the helicopter. "I mean, the men are gone. The stickup men."

"You're sure?"

"Positive," he yelled. "They gave us shots in the butt to knock us out. They had a bag full of syringes."

"Get these people away from the bank," I said to another officer who had come up behind me. "Get them back. And get the damn helicopter out of here."

"Yes, sir," he said.

"Go with them," I said to Forest. "Keep everybody together."

He nodded.

"Any idea how much they got?" I asked him.

"About fifty thousand."

I nodded this time. Then I stepped into the bank. I had my gun out, but I put it away almost at once. Whatever had happened was over. People still slept on the granite floor of the bank. A few had come awake and now sat up, scratching their heads and trying to get their movements coordinated. It looked like a slumber party or a high-school gym the morning after a natural disaster.

I stepped back to the door and waved to Wally. He ran up to hear what I wanted.

"Let the medical teams in," I said. "And don't let anyone leave."

"Okay," he said.

"No one," I said.

"Okay."

"And for the love of Pete, get the helicopter out of here."

"You're on the news, Poulchuck," District Attorney Hast said over the phone. He wanted to be governor and always wanted to be patched through to anything that might get play in the evening news. I could barely hear him. I covered my free ear with my free hand. I figured he would give me the law-and-order talk. He was famous around the state for law-and-order talks.

"Before or after *Wheel of Fortune?*" I asked.

"You have any ideas who might have done this?"

"I think they're locals. I think they stole the money, tied it to the pigeons' legs, then they gave each other a shot and knocked themselves out."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I don't get you," Hast said, his voice louder. "You saying they're still there?"

"I'm saying they planned it so they didn't have to get away. They just laid down with the others and that's that."

"Clever bastards," Hast said. "You sure they couldn't have slipped out?"

"Why bother with the pigeons then?"

He didn't say anything for a second. The helicopter finally lifted. I heard people on the other end of the phone, people at a party. I thought about telling District Attorney Hast that I didn't have time to talk to him. Then I thought that that wouldn't make much difference. He was a guy who thought he made things better just by talking.

"We got the state boys coming up to help you out," Hast said. "And we can get the feebies on it. The FBI. It's a bank robbery, so it's federal."

"I don't think I need anyone right now."

"You have everyone's name? The people inside the bank?"

"The medical team is looking them over right now."

"So you're saying these guys broke in, tied money to the pigeons' legs, then they gave themselves shots in the butts and laid down with the rest of the people in the bank. So they kind of blended in, in other words."

"That's what I'm saying."

"Damn," Hast said, then he said to someone else, his hand not quite covering the sound, "I'm talking to him now. Yes, he's on the phone now."

"I got to go," I said.

"Can you think of any way to sort it out?"

"You know the riddle about how you know which corpse belongs to Adam?"

"No, what?"

"The one without the belly button. That's Adam."

"What the hell are you talking about, Poulchuck?"

"I'm hoping the last one didn't stick himself with the hypodermic. Maybe he just laid down and pretended to be groggy. But they're pretty smart, so it's a long shot."

"Adam, huh?"

"Because no mother bore him."

"I got it, Poulchuck," Hast said. "Call me."

He hung up. I stepped back inside the bank.

Forest McIver, the Pemigewasset Bank VP, had his arm in a blood-pressure cuff. An EMT named Freddy pumped it up and held a stethoscope to the inside of McIver's elbow. Freddy listened, then ripped off the Velcro. Freddy ran a back hoe for the state

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

when he wasn't being an EMT. He liked Harleys. He had a tattoo on his wrist that looked like a Navajo bracelet.

"You're fine," Freddy told McIver. Freddy's belly swung when he turned to put the BP cuff back in his bag. Freddy probably needed a bath.

"What did they use to knock them out?" I asked Freddy. "Any idea?"

"Could be a thousand things," Freddy said. "No big deal to knock someone out."

"You going to send it out for a blood sample? To tell the drug, I mean?"

"Might," Freddy said, still jamming stuff back in his bag. "If you say to."

"I say to."

"All right then, we'll do that."

I looked at McIver. He appeared weary. He stared straight ahead, then slowly, without seeming to notice he was doing it, rolled down his shirt sleeve. He had short arms.

"You okay?" I asked him.

"I guess," he said. "A little woozy."

"I'll bet. Can you tell me how it went, start to finish?"

He shrugged, then started talking like they do in movies when they're trying to recall something, dreamy and slow.

He said, "Some guys came in with baskets of pigeons. Pigeon carriers. They were dressed as ninjas. The guys, not the pigeons. Four of them. I thought it was a joke of some sort. Then they pulled guns and told us it was a stickup. They took two women, customers, almost immediately. Put the guns right to their heads. To the women's heads, I mean."

"I understand. Then what?"

He finished with his sleeve. He buttoned the cuff. It took him a little while.

"Asked us to empty out the safe," he said. "We didn't have much cash on hand, thank goodness. Two of the men took the money and the women upstairs to the roof."

"They knew where the roof was?" I asked. "The access?"

McIver nodded.

Freddy caught my eye when he had his bag shut, nodded, then went off. I followed his progress through the room. Things had calmed down. The helicopter was gone. Two large staties stood in the doorway of the bank, not letting anyone in or out. Whoever had robbed the bank was probably still inside.

"They knew everything," McIver said. "Smart guys, believe me. They talked Donald Duck talk."

"How's that?" I asked.

"You know, kind of squish out of the side of their cheeks. Like

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Donald Duck. I had an uncle who could do it. Used to make us laugh as kids."

"And that's how they talked?"

"Yes," McIver said. "Louie, Dewey, and who was the third one?"

"I don't remember," I said. "I'm not good with that kind of stuff."

"Well, that's how they talked. Then one of them came around and made us expose our buttocks while the other stood guard. They had two teams, one upstairs, one down. He made a woman administer the shots while we watched. We all had a shot. That's it. Then we were knocked out."

"Pretty clever," I said. "Means they're still in this room. They got the money out of here. That's half the battle."

McIver suddenly got light in his eyes. He seemed to figure something out.

He asked, "Won't there be hairs and things in the ninja suits? I mean, can't you tell if someone wore something?"

"Maybe. But not for a couple days, probably. Whoever did it could go home, collect the money, then take off. They probably have someone at the pigeon coop waiting to retrieve the money. I doubt they homed them to one of their houses. Probably homed them to someone else's place. Something like that."

"You ever hear of anything like this before?" McIver asked.

"Never did," I said, and I hadn't.

"I can't believe they can get away with it."

"Huey," I said.

"Who?" McIver asked, puzzled.

"Huey. Huey, Louie, and Dewey. Donald Duck's nephews."

"Right," he said.

Wally said, "The TV guys heard about the pigeons. They're going wild."

I nodded. Wally was excited, I could tell. He hadn't seen crimes like this at Ames.

"I need to look at their butts," I said. "All of them."

"Are you serious?" Wally asked. "You're not serious, are you?"

"I'm serious. Give me the telephone. Get Ginny in here. Tell her I want her to examine the women. Anything suspicious, she calls me and lets me take a look. Understand?"

"Ginny's home."

"I'll look at the guys' butts. We'll put the women in the back room. We'll do it as soon as Ginny gets here."

"You're a wild man," Wally said and left. I watched him cross the room. He had his chest out. He was feeling pretty big.

I didn't know if I really wanted to look at their butts, but it was the only thing I could think to do. It bought me some time. I tried to think what else I knew about the crime. It wasn't much. I fig-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ured the thieves were likely to be young, maybe a little counterculture, because a plan like this took a long time to pull together. But that was only a guess. They might just as easily be midlife guys, annoyed, trying to hit it big before they got too old and baggy to enjoy things.

Wally came back a few minutes later and said Ginny was on her way. Ginny laughed, he said, when he told her what she was supposed to do. Wally also said there was a guy on the phone who called himself a falconer. Wally said the guy had heard the news report on Channel 9 and figured he'd call the police. The guy knew a lot about pigeons, Wally said. He used his falcons to hunt them.

"Does the guy sound like a crackpot?" I asked.

"I didn't talk to him. It came over the radio from dispatch."

"Let me talk to him," I said.

"Also," Wally said, "this woman right here wants to know how long we're going to detain them. She won't be happy until she talks to you."

Wally nodded at a woman of about sixty, who had been waiting like a door spring to jump up as soon as we directed our attention to her. She wore preppy colors—lime greens and pale yellows. She wore a straw hat and carried a bag that was also made of straw. The bag was square and could have been used as a donkey saddle. I didn't recognize her. She seemed accustomed to having her way with help. I didn't like being considered help. I figured her for a laker, one of the summer people who come and sit on their porches and tell local people how to improve their lives.

"We'll get through this as fast as possible," I told her, hoping to keep her in her seat. "I promise you that."

"Because," she said, not really listening and standing anyway, "my niece is supposed to meet me to go over plans for her wedding. We're holding the affair on Little Squam."

"As soon as we're finished, madam."

"But I'd like some idea of when that will be."

"We all would," I said, turning away from her. "Wally, please transfer the falconer to me."

"Sir," she said, "sir, I've just been through something very traumatic and I'd like a decent response to my question."

"Shut up," I said.

Her mouth opened. She looked at me. Wally scuttled off.

"There are a lot of falconers around these parts?" I asked the man on the other end of the line. He had identified himself as Stuart Pope. Stew, he said people called him. He had already told me more than I wanted to know about homing pigeons. He had said a lot of people ran them in the area. Normally had to have a barn, but not necessarily. Could do it from a roof. You could even hang

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

baskets on the side of your house to let pigeons roost there. Of course, Stew said, that was messy.

"Oh, we have a whole falconers club," Stew said, excited like some guys get excited over ham-radio sets. "We have medieval outings four times a year."

"And what are those like?" I asked. "These medieval outings?"

"Oh, wonderful events," he said. "We go on horseback. One of the members, Phillip Cardopholis, he owns horses. He's a pilot for Delta, so you know he makes pretty good money. Anyway, he keeps horses. He comes along, although he doesn't hunt, really."

"So you go out with your falcons?"

"Yes," he said. "We dress up in medieval garb. You know. The women wear veils. We eat outdoors and we fly the falcons."

"Sounds picturesque."

"Oh, it is. It's magnificent. In the fall, we go for pigeons. Very few people know about it. We keep it pretty private."

"Where do you get the pigeons?"

"We don't get them in the sense you mean. We hunt them."

"I mean, where do you hunt them?"

"Well, that's why I called. The best spot is near the Cable farm. Robert Cable's place? Do you know it?"

"No, I don't."

"It's near Mount Carr. Up near Warren, New Hampshire."

"Does he raise pigeons?"

"I don't know. We've never actually gone on the property. But the falcons have brought down a couple pigeons up that way and the pigeons were banded. We always feel terrible when that happens, because we're not against pigeons, you understand. We're simply pro falcon."

"I understand."

"Most of us use pigeons to train. We keep them in the mews, along with the falcons."

"I understand. Robert Cable, you say, in Warren?"

"That's right."

"Is there anything else you can think to tell me that might shed some light on this?"

"There are clubs for pigeon enthusiasts," he said. "You might check those."

"Thanks," I said.

"Pretty ironic," he said, "about using pigeons. What do they say about money? That isn't chicken feed."

"That's ironic, all right."

"A peregrine falcon can stoop at speeds up to two hundred miles per hour. Did you know that?"

"I knew they were fast."

"Fastest animal on earth."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I see," I said.

"Those are the falcons that recently moved back into Boston. I was called in as a consultant by the Audubon Society. The falcons thrived with all the pigeons handy to Boston."

"I bet they would."

"Power lines and windows are the main worries for raptors. But you know, when a peregrine hits a pigeon in flight, well, it's more like an explosion than a simple kill."

"Dramatic," I said.

"Oh, yes."

"Well, you've been very helpful, Mr. Pope."

"Well, when I heard pigeons, I thought I should call."

"You did the right thing. Let me ask you one last thing. How long would it take a pigeon to travel, say, ten miles?"

"Hard to know. They fly surprisingly fast, though not at rates that would impress a falcon. They also stop frequently. Their endurance isn't wonderful and they can't really ride the thermals. If they come across a corn field or something rich with food, they might stop and feed for a while. But they concentrate on getting home, too. They'd want to be in by nightfall."

"Well, that's a help. Thanks for your time."

"My pleasure," Mr. Pope said and hung up.

Wally said, "The D.A. is on the line again."

"Tell him I am no further along than the last time he called. Tell him I'll call him if I have anything to add. Tell him I hope he's having a nice time at the party."

"You really want me to tell him that?"

I looked at Wally. We both had coffees. I blew on the coffee's surface and looked at Wally again.

"I'll tell him you're busy," Wally said.

"Thanks."

I leaned against the bank counter. I had run out of ideas. I wasn't sure what to do next. The people were getting restless and bored. Two had gone off to the hospital for monitoring. Those two were old and I doubted they had held up a bank. The preppy woman who had asked me to give her a departure time had been joined by a few others, all of them glowing with indignation that I was holding them. From radio talk, I knew the FBI branch guys from Concord would arrive soon. The easy thing to do was to keep the scene calm, then hand the investigation over to them. They could run a check on the ninja suits, scan for hairs and fibers, scan for skin cells and secretions, then narrow things down. Realistically, studying the bank clients, I figured only five or six were likely candidates. The FBI could run surveillance on them until the results came back.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I carried my coffee outside. Three cruisers still blocked the street. DePaul, an old-time statie, had put on an orange vest and waved traffic around the town square. When he saw me he raised his hands to ask how long it would be. I raised my hands back, the coffee spilling a little on my wrist. They had done a pretty good job of dispersing foot traffic. The scene was as orderly as it was going to get. I looked at my watch. I calculated it had been an hour and seventeen minutes since the call came over the radio. Driving at sixty or seventy miles per hour, the FBI guys would probably make the forty miles from Concord at any moment. I had almost finished the coffee when I thought of something.

"Tell them to stand," I said to Wally back inside.

"The people?"

"Yeah, tell them all to stand. Use the bull horn."

Wally used the bullhorn. It was loud inside the bank. He didn't quite understand the bullhorn, because he figured he had to shout through it. The amplification, combined with his shouting, made half the people cover their ears. I made a calm sign with my palm downward. Wally backed his voice off.

"Tell anyone wearing pants to pull up their pant legs," I said to Wally.

He told them. A few people grumbled. The women in skirts shook their heads. The ones in pants did as they were told. The men, too. It took about ten seconds to see the first man with pigeon shit on his shoes. He wore black shoes with lug soles. I put him at about twenty-seven. He wore a green-checked flannel shirt and a pair of jeans. His face looked red underneath a well-trimmed goatee. I walked up to him.

"You got pigeon shit on your shoes," I said.

He shrugged.

"I can understand having pigeon shit on the soles of your shoes, but not on the top. You'd have to be pretty close to the pigeons to get shit on the top of your shoes. You'd probably have to carry them."

"I don't know what you're talking about, man," he said. "You freaking Barney Fife?"

"What were you doing in here anyway?"

"Banking," the guy said.

"You're funny. You know, this pigeon-shit thing just popped into my head."

"Hurray for you."

"What kind of banking? You have accounts here?"

"Sure I do," he said. "Checking and savings."

"Good," I said. "What's your name anyway?"

"Jackie Lester."

"You live around here?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yeah," he said. "You think I just like this bank or something?"

"If I look you up in the computer, you going to have a record?"

"Naw."

"You're a clean guy, huh?"

"Oh, yeah."

I circled the collection of bank clients. No one else had pigeon shit on his shoes. I went back to Jackie and asked him to follow me into a back room. It was somebody's office. Whoever used the office liked the Red Sox and fake leather. I closed the door. I asked Jackie where he lived. He thought about not answering for a second, then said in Wentworth. I asked him where his car was parked. He said he didn't drive in today. I asked him what kind of car he usually drove. He said a Toyota pickup, but it was on the blink.

"How did you get in today, then?" I asked. He hesitated, then said, "Came in with a friend."

"Any of your friends in the bank here with you?"

He thought about that. His face got more red. He was caught. He knew it and I knew it. He didn't say anything, but it didn't take a genius to know what would happen next. We would hold him and check him out. He would eventually lead us to the other guys. That was simple. We'd find the vehicles. We'd find the pigeon shit, too—like Hansel and Gretel, they left a trail.

"Probably sitting around, this whole thing seemed like a good idea," I said. "You know, dreaming stuff like this up. It always sounds good."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure you do," I said. "You sit around on a porch somewhere and you smoke some weed and have a couple beers and you figure, look, we're not going to hurt anyone. You figure you will kind of go down in the record books. You know, for ingenuity."

"You're nuts, man."

"Clever idea, though. It really was."

"I'm telling you, you're nuts."

"Sure I am."

I saw his eye go to my pistol. I saw him consider the grand play. It happens too often to people who watch too much TV or Sylvester Stallone movies. They think it's easy to wrestle a gun away from someone, put it to the head of a hostage, and make a miraculous escape. But Jackie couldn't make himself believe it.

"You armed?" I asked him, though I knew he wouldn't be. He couldn't blend in with the others if he carried a weapon.

"No," he said, "why should I be?"

"Pigeon shit, of all things. You thought of everything else, I bet."

"You're nuts."

Someone knocked. I went to the door and opened it. Wally stood

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with a man in a grey suit. I recognized the grey-suit guy the way you recognize a guy you see in the hardware store. I knew I'd seen him before, but I couldn't put a name to him.

"I think this is your guy," I said. "Jackie Lester. Lives in Wentworth. He's got pigeon shit on his shoes."

I went with the guy in the grey suit to Robert Cable's house in Warren. So did about ten other cops. The guy in the grey suit was named Johnson. No one called him by his first name, unless Johnson was his first name. He drove with his wrists mostly, his right one hooked on the steering wheel like a washing-machine hose. He had a search warrant.

"If he's smart, he already got rid of the money," Johnson said.

"If he's smart."

"And if he's not smart, the pigeons will be coming in with money strapped to their legs."

"Probably not against the law to have pigeons land at your house with money on their legs," I said. "When it comes to it, I mean."

Johnson nodded.

Robert Cable's house was a big place with fake redwood clapboards and a couple sheep in a big corral outside the front door. The sheep looked up at all the cars. The house appeared about right for a couple from Massachusetts playing at farming in New Hampshire. We sent guys around back, sent a few to the small barn on the north side of the property, then knocked on the front door. A woman answered. She wore a pair of jeans, a flannel shirt, and L. L. Bean duck boots. She had a portable phone pressed to her ear. She appeared to be about forty.

"Oh, Laurie," she said into the phone, "the police are here. I've got to go."

She pushed a button on the phone. Then she held the phone against her leg.

"He did it, didn't he?" she asked me.

She was a good-looking woman who once upon a time was a redhead. Now her hair was the color of an old picnic table.

"Ma'am?" I asked.

"That simple moron. He did it, didn't he? As soon as I heard pigeons were involved, I knew it was John. Those stupid, stupid men."

"Do you care to explain?"

She shook her head. Whether she shook it to say she didn't want to explain, or whether it was simple exasperation, it was hard to say.

She said, "The pigeons are in the barn. Up in the mow. John's probably gone by now. That's the advantage to being a pilot."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"We'd like to take a look," Johnson said. "He's a pilot?"

"For Delta. About five or six pilots live around here. It's a little enclave. Cheap land. More bang for your dollar."

"You mind if we take a look?" Johnson asked.

"Be my guest," she said.

She led us around the house. The barn was a nice post-and-beam structure. Someone had converted the upstairs into an office. A big table stood in the center, a computer on top. A TV hung on brackets from the ceiling. The actual hay mow had been boxed in and turned into a pigeon coop. I counted twenty birds with money attached to their legs. Two of Johnson's men stood next to the coop, pointing out birds with their fingers. They resembled kids at the local petting zoo. I turned to talk to Mrs. Cable. She had a lot of color in her face.

"So how did this happen?" I asked her.

"He sat up here with those idiotic men and hatched all sorts of stupid, stupid plots," Mrs. Cable said. "I told him all we had to do was cut back, but he kept looking to make a killing. Then he had places we could fly to and no one could ever extradite us."

I asked, "Where are those places?"

"Indonesia, I think. Bali. I hardly listened when he talked about it."

"You think he's headed that way now?"

"Probably," she said. "He probably put himself out of the country just in case."

"You don't know where he is exactly?" Johnson asked.

"No."

"When was the last time you saw him?" I asked.

"Two days ago. Maybe three days ago."

She went to the desk, opened the top drawer, and took out a cigarette. She put it to her lips and pulled a lighter out of her front pocket.

"I don't smoke unless I feel like it," she said. "Forgive me."

"No problem," Johnson said. "We have a warrant and we're going to have to go over this place pretty well. We'll try not to mess it up too much."

"I understand," Mrs. Cable said, blowing some smoke. "You have to do what you have to do."

Johnson nodded at the men near the coop. They pulled open the door and stepped inside. The birds fluttered and banged around. Mrs. Cable watched them for a second, then stubbed out her cigarette.

"I'm going to have to show you how to do all that," she said. "Just hold on."

She went to a small wardrobe and opened it. She pulled out a pair of green gardening sandals. She slipped out of her Birken-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stocks and chugged into the sandals. On a hunch I went over to the wardrobe and opened it wider. A white smock hung inside. So did a woman's coat and an old straw hat. I didn't see any men's clothes. I thought about how easily she found the cigarettes in the top drawer of the desk.

"You both work the pigeons?" I asked. "You and your husband?"

"They belong to John," she said, still kicking into the slippers. She didn't look at me. She reached into the wardrobe and pulled out the white smock. It was the kind of tie-behind apron that Martha Stewart wears when she cans peaches or makes centerpieces from broom straw.

I glanced at Johnson.

"It would be a hell of a way to frame a husband," Johnson said. "You know, waiting until he was out of the country, then committing a crime that involved him. Blame it on him, so to speak."

"That's ridiculous," she said, tying the apron strings behind her back the way women can. She looked straight at Johnson. "It's probably also libel."

"You mean slander," I said. "Slander is spoken, libel is written."

"I stand corrected," she said.

I said, "The other thing about the crime is that if it worked, you'd have some pretty nice money. That would also work in a woman's favor if she wanted to leave her husband. In some ways, you couldn't lose."

"Difficult thing to prove," she said, "even if it were true."

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "Once things start to come out they have a way of leaking all over."

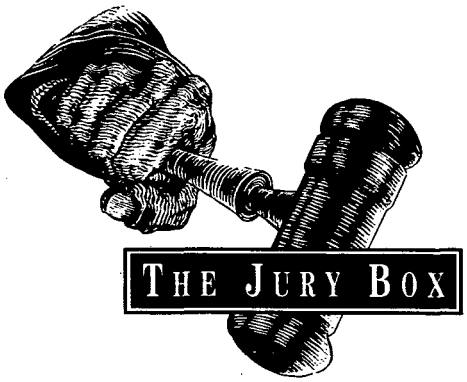
"Like broken eggs," Johnson said.

"I'm going to settle the pigeons down," Mrs. Cable said. "I'll leave you men to your theories."

She went to the pigeon coop and asked the officers to step out. Then she stood for a moment without moving. The pigeons quieted bit by bit. You had to admire her way with the birds. They settled on their roosts, loose feathers from their nests lifting with the flap of their wings. ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine,* and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



by Jon L. Breen

Writers of mystery fiction have long used title patterns to effect brand recognition. The Ellery Queen team, following the example of S. S. Van Dine's immensely popular Philo Vance novels *(The Benson Murder Case, The "Canary" Murder Case,* and other six-letter-word murder cases), created an original nationality-object pattern in their early novels: *The Roman Hat Mystery, The Dutch Shoe Mystery,* etc. In the October 1946 issue of *EQMM,* editor Queen introduced Clifford Knight's "The Affair at the Circle T" with a discussion of the phenomenon, citing such examples as the use of the keyword *Black* in titles by Cornell Woolrich and the team of Constance and Gwenyth Little. (The Little sisters are being revived in trade paperback by Rue Morgue Press [P.O. Box 4119, Boulder, CO 80306]—for a strong example of their work, try the very funny and inventive 1938 novel of a dysfunctional family Christmas, *The Black-Headed Pins* [$14].)

Frances Crane used multiple colors in her titles *(The Turquoise Shop, Death in Lilac Time),* a policy later adopted by John D. MacDonald *(A Purple Place for Dying, The Quick Red Fox)* and Walter Mosley *(Devil in a Blue Dress, A Little Yellow Dog).* The Queen cousins writing as Barnaby Ross used letters of the alphabet *(The Traged[ies] of X, Y, and Z),* as did Lawrence Treat *(B as in Banshee, V as in Victim).* Years later, Sue Grafton, whose father C. W. had used the first two lines of a Mother Goose rhyme *(The Rat Began to Gnaw the Rope* and *The Rope Began to Hang the Butcher)* in a 1940s series, would adapt Treat's out-of-order alphabetical titles to her own more orderly sequence *(A is for Alibi, B is for Burglar).* The 1930s team who wrote as Francis Beeding used numbers, counting backwards from *The Seven Sleepers* to *The One Sane Man* then forward from *The*

©2000 by Jon L. Breen

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Eight Crooked Trenches to *There Are Thirteen,* while Janet Evanovich in the 1990s began her own methodical sequence *(One for the Money, Two for the Dough, Three to Get Deadly).* Lindsey Davis used metals in her Marcus Didius Falco titles *(The Silver Pigs, Shadows in Bronze)* but abandoned them after five books.

Among the most inventive title patterns is Jill Churchill's domestic puns on famous literary works: *War and Peas, From Here to Paternity, Grime and Punishment,* and, cleverest of all, *A Quiche Before Dying.* (The target 1953 classic, Ira Levin's *A Kiss Before Dying,* one of the finest first novels in crime fiction history, is available in a new paperback reprint [Carroll & Graf, $5.95].)

Below, some other current series that make inventive use of title patterns.

**** Val Davis: *Wake of the Hornet,* Bantam, $5.99. *Track of the Scorpion* and *Flight of the Serpent* are followed by the best adventure yet for aircraft archaeologist Nicolette (Nick) Scott. The background of a Pacific Island, whose natives follow the teachings of the Cargo Cults and have constructed a phony airfield to attract planes, is both fresh and fascinating, and the payoff is as good as the buildup.

*** Anne Perry: *Half Moon Street,* Ballantine, $25. The novels about Victorian London cop Thomas Pitt (wife Charlotte is offstage this time) usually are named for London streets or neighborhoods (recently *Brunswick Gardens* and *Bedford Square).* A fashionable male photographer is found dead and wearing a dress in a punt on the Thames, with all manner of Dread Secrets revealed in the investigation. Mrs. Pitt is missed, but series fans will enjoy the finishing surprise and new insights into two continuing characters, Charlotte's mother and grandmother.

*** Ed Gorman: *Wake Up, Little Susie,* Carroll & Graf, $22.95. Following *The Day the Music Died,* Gorman chooses another oldie song title for a second evocative and cunningly plotted novel about small-town private eye cum lawyer Sam McCain, beginning with a local car dealer's disastrous unveiling of the new Edsel and rich in late-1950s details and atmosphere. (A short story of the same title in Gorman's *Famous Blue Raincoat,* reviewed here in April's column, features some of the same characters and background but is quite different in plot.)

*** Lee Harris: *The Mother's Day Murder,* Fawcett, $6.50. Harris's holiday series, beginning with *The Good Friday Murder,* is now up to a dozen volumes. In a strong example of the suburban cozy, ex-nun and cop's wife Christine Bennett investigates an intriguing problem: the murder of a mendacious house guest who claims to be the illegitimate daughter of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the Mother Superior of Chris's old convent.

*** April Henry: *Square in the Face,* HarperCollins, $24. Henry lays claim to geometric shapes in the follow-up to *Circles of Confusion,* which introduced likeable amateur sleuth Claire Montrose of the Oregon Specialty License Plate Department. Now wealthily retired, Claire seeks a girl, given up for very secret adoption, whose brother needs a bone marrow transplant to treat his leukemia. Though developed slowly, the complex plot is a good one and fair-play clues are provided. Puzzle-minded readers also get some vanity plates to decipher. On the downside, a scene of over-the-top movie-ish violence is unconvincing.

*** Graham Thomas: *Malice in London,* Fawcett, $6.50. In an example of the keyword method, the series about Scotland Yard's Erskine Powell has previously addressed malice in the Highlands, Cornwall, and the Moors. The murders of a politician and a restaurant critic, both involved in a Docklands development deal, may or may not be connected to the disappearance of a barmaid. A well-constructed, fast-reading mystery with an especially strong sense of locale.

*** Dorothy Gilman: *Mrs. Pollifax Unveiled,* Ballantine, $23. The most obvious brand recognition device is putting the main character's name in the title, the practice of this entertaining series since *The Unexpected Mrs. Pollifax* (1966). Representing a rare hybrid, the espionage cozy—James Bond meets Jessica Fletcher—this adventure is unlikely but sure-handed as an old shoe (mixed metaphor intentional). The scene is Syria, the mission the rescue of a young woman who vanished after being celebrated for foiling an airline hijacking.

** Robin Hathaway: *The Doctor Makes a Dollhouse Call,* St. Martin's, $23.95. Or you can put the detective's occupation in the title, as in this follow-up to the Agatha-Award-winning *The Doctor Digs a Grave.* The set-up is promising: tampering with a dollhouse belonging to two elderly sisters forecasts a series of family murders. But where's the audience? The novel is too utterly divorced from reality to satisfy most domestic cozy fans, and the lack of fair-play clues (despite a subtle variation on EQ's challenge to the reader) will antagonize the traditionalist. Dr. Andrew Fenimore is a notably ineffectual amateur detective.

** Chris Rogers: *Chill Factor,* Bantam, $23.95. *Bitch Factor* and *Rage Factor* are followed by a third case for Texas bounty hunter Dixie Flannigan. Rogers's narrative flair will keep you reading, but the sprawling plot, involving among other things a series of bank robberies by grandmotherly women, local politics, a weird cult, and Internet porn is tough to swallow.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Mark Walker Evans

THE ALLOTMENT

by Peter Crowther

Perhaps the only person in Luddersedge who *hadn't* known that Maureen Walker was fed up to the back teeth of her husband Stanley was Stan himself. But then there were many things that life, in its infinite and capricious wisdom, blew past Stan's eyes and even right under his nose . . . just like the tick-tock, tell-the-time dandelion seeds forever airborne around the hummocks and holes of Stan's beloved allotment.

It wouldn't be fair to say that Stan didn't *care* for Maureen, although to suggest that he actually loved her possibly stretched the truth a jot. He cared for her in his very own special way, even though she wasn't the be-all and end-all of his life (she did turn out to be *one* of those, but that's jumping the gun a little).

The truth was that the two things which probably came closest to earning Stan Walker's affection—aside from his allotment—were (a) watching football on the TV and (b) the Black Sheep brewery up in Masham, to whose continued financial success and security Stan had contributed more than his share over the years.

Stan's only other weakness was a seemingly endless stream of

©2000 by Peter Crowther

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ideas for how he and Maureen could get rich quick, such as the specialist sweet shop in Todmorden or the mobile dating agency he set up in Rochdale: Stan was always promising his wife that the next one would be The Big One—that once-in-a-lifetime golden opportunity to make money—but each scheme had come and gone with little to show for its passing but another hole in their meagre savings.

All of these were thorns in Maureen's side but, in aggravation terms, it was the allotment that took the biscuit.

After successfully debuting as a short-story writer in the U.K. in the early 1970s, Peter Crowther took a break from fiction-writing to concentrate on freelance music and arts journalism. In 1990, he reappeared on the fiction shelves with anthology stories in several different genres: fantasy, horror, mystery, and science fiction. The Yorkshire author's first fiction for *EQMM* is a memorable variation on the spouse murder theme. †

The allotment—one of six in a stand-alone patch of land on Honeydew Lane, edging onto the lane itself as well as onto Smithfield Road, Carholme Place, and Carholme Drive—was an eighty-square-yards rectangle of vegetable-festooned soil interspersed with narrow grassy "tending" paths. The allotment's main border, Honeydew Lane, one of the town's primary vehicular arteries and site of the notorious Bentley's Tannery, was an area blighted by such permanently pungent fumes that, or so local legend had it, the infamous Hounds of Luddersedge—an itinerant canine pack of all shapes and sizes (though mostly of a common variety: Heinz 57) given to defecating on the pavements of the town—were drawn to the locality, frequently depositing turds of varying consistency in and around the carefully and even lovingly cultivated plants and produce.

It was here that Stan spent increasing amounts of his time. Since his retirement (aged 52, now some four years ago) from the buses (a mobile and carefree life wandering the lanes between Rochdale and Burnley and Halifax), he had spent the hours and days and weeks (not to mention months, seasons, and years) dreaming of The Big One—the idea that would make them their millions (or at least a few thousands)—and tending his prided potato crop.

There had been a time, in the late fifties, when the streets of Luddersedge had been an olfactory grotto of the smells of Yorkshire-pudding mix and quietly cooking joints of meat and pans of vegetables on a Sunday morning, and the allotments had been well tended and picturesque. The young Stan had gone there to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

help his father every week. But those were the old days. Now, two of the other five allotments had gone to weed and a third one, Maureen had noticed one day when she walked down to the shops, was already showing signs of neglect. Stan would regularly come home looking glum because he'd found half-squashed empty beer cans jammed in amongst his sweetpeas . . . and, on one occasion, a used condom beside a flattened section of potato plants.

"Some folk'll do it anywhere," Stan announced on his return from that particular Sunday visit to the allotment, wafting straight to the sports pages of *The News of the World* as he sat waiting for his dinner. "I don't know what's happening to the world, I really don't."

Serving the mashed potatoes out onto her best blue-flowered plates using an ice cream scoop bought for her at the massive Ikea warehouse on an all-too-infrequent outing to Leeds by Stan for her birthday, Maureen quietly but fervently wished that her husband might introduce a similar element of adventure and spontaneity into their own love life. At fifty-three, and still in the prime of her life (as she delighted in telling anyone who would listen), Maureen Walker craved some excitement. The truth was, she craved anything at all that would break the humdrum of the life she had somehow drifted into without even seeing it coming towards her. But such was not to be the case.

Stan Walker was not an adventurous man. Nor was he spontaneous, affectionate, interesting, learned, amusing, successful, or even (much as Maureen didn't even like to think it) handsome. And while her husband had probably never been any of these things even when he was running around the streets and lanes of Luddersedge in his short trousers, playing hide-and-seek or looking for conkers in the cool autumns of the Calder Valley, Maureen firmly placed the blame for her current situation at but one door: the allotment.

As far as Maureen Walker was concerned, it was the allotment that was the villain of the piece . . . and so it was, on one of those lonely, empty summer mornings when Stan had already left the house, that the arrival of an official-looking letter from the local council provided her with what she considered to be a neat solution to her problem.

In those days when the pair used to go out together of an evening—usually down to the Conservative Club on Eldershot Road but more often to The Three Pennies public house on Pennypot Drive, where Stan could get his fix of Black Sheep—Maureen used to joke, though somewhat without humour even then, that Stan's "other woman" was a piece of ground filled with cabbages and carrot tops. It used to get a laugh for a time, from whoever might be sitting with them . . . and even from Maureen herself,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

though Stan would never respond. He would simply throw an occasional nod into the conversation, a distant half-smile on his face that suggested he had been drugged or was pulling out of a long coma into a world that he neither recognised nor cherished. And all the while he would repeatedly lift the ever-present pint glass of Masham's finest for a series of life-renewing slurps.

Unable to get much out of her husband, Maureen took to laying it on the line as far as her home life went with anyone who would take the time to listen—and as far as Luddersedge went, that was a lot of people.

Maureen would bemoan her lot to Joan Cardew and Miriam Barrett—of numbers 10 and 14 respectively—over the rickety fence that separated her and Stan's house from Joan's and Eddie's and the shock of privet that formed an unkempt but effective barrier with the widowed Mrs. Barrett's threadbare patch of grass.

With clothes hung freshly out to dry in the wind blowing through the Calder valley—predominantly Stan's voluminous Y-fronts and Maureen's no-longer-very-lacy bras and panties from Marks and Sparks—Maureen would, at one time, in the early days, tell either Joan or Miriam that she was nearing the end of her tether. That if he didn't leave her then she would take the bull by the horns and leave *him*.

She would tell the same thing to lisping Bert Green at the greengrocer's on the High Street, as Bert watched her pressing the sides of his avocados with undisguised annoyance; and to young Kylie Bickershaw with the bitten-down fingernails who worked the checkout at the Netto's behind the station car park and seemed to make a habit of shortchanging everyone; and even to Billy Roberts, the quiffed and always-tanned would-be gigolo who carved a mean rack of chops in his father's butcher's shop at the corner of Lemon Road and Coronation Drive.

Sometimes, when Maureen was watching young Billy—some thirty years her junior—carve a joint or pound beefsteak, it was all she could do to keep from openly drooling . . . watching those biceps work, and those thighs balloon out to fill his tight black trousers. One time, when he caught her and saw the naked desire on her face, Billy said, "Looks to me you could pop it into your mouth right here, Mrs. Walker," and Maureen readily agreed, blushing faintly at the idea that Billy might well have read her thoughts . . . not one of which had anything to do with meat (at least, none of the stuff being turned around on Billy's slab). Needless to say, Billy knew that just as well as Maureen did.

And so it was that word spread around Luddersedge the way it will spread around any small town, sometimes reaching the far end before the person who set it off even gets there. Not that Maureen actually wanted everyone to know her business—she didn't.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was simply a release valve and, anyway, subconsciously, she considered service people and neighbours to be the souls of discretion—but, of course, things don't always work out the way we intend them. And when a release valve becomes blocked, the pressure has to escape somewhere.

"I hear things aren't so good with you and your Stan," Mary Connaught said to Maureen one day, groaning with relief as she switched the straining net carrier bag from her welt-disfigured left hand into the right. "Is it that you're getting sick of waiting for The Big One?"

Maureen decided to ignore the remark about Stan's schemes—"treat it with the contemp it dizzerbs," her mother would have said in her characteristic pidgin-English dialect. "Whoever told you that?" she asked, feigning surprise and even a dose of healthy indignation, one hand lifted to fiddle with the cameo brooch that Maureen's Auntie Lillian had bequeathed to her the previous year and the other laid spread-fingered on her hip.

Mary Connaught shrugged. "A little bird," she said.

The confidant in question was neither a bird nor was it little. It was, in fact, Jim Fairclough, with whom Mary had been having something of a hot-and-sweaty flirtation since the departure of Mary's husband Thomas—Thomas having fled the family nest not only with the contents of his and Mary's joint account at the building society over in Hebden Bridge (amounting to some £16,000 when interest had been added) but with the cashier who served him to boot. The pair were said to be now living in Ibiza—where Thomas and Mary had spent their summer holidays for their entire married life of eight-getting-on-nine years ("... adding insult to injury," was how Miriam Barrett had summed it up ... an opinion undoubtedly echoed by Mary)—and, for a time, Mary had considered trying to track them down. But then she started the relationship with Jim and all other things just kind of got pushed to the back of her mind.

Jim Fairclough's brother, Martin, was a regular feature wherever Billy Roberts appeared—there were some about town who said the two of them were like one person and that person's shadow, though who was which was a debatable point—and so Mary had heard all about Maureen's looks and the perspiration that always appeared on her top lip while Billy was pounding his meat. She heard about them on Jim's now frequent visits to her house—always under cover of darkness ... though that did not matter a jot to Harriet Williams, the eagle-eyed sentinel of number 41 (Mary's house was number 43) who, in turn, was spreading the news to any who would stop and listen.

The conversation drifted to other things—a move started with Maureen's wide-eyed and innocent enquiry as to whether Mary

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had heard anything from her errant husband—and then pulled to a close with both women suddenly remembering other places they had arranged to be.

As Maureen watched Mary Connaught walk purposefully across the road, pausing only to give a wave to Pete Dickinson in his customised Cortina (Pete was the mechanic at Tony Manderson's garage over on Eldershot Road), she realised just how incestuous Luddersedge really was. It shouldn't really have taken her so long: After all, Miriam Barrett had said once that you couldn't break wind in Luddersedge without folks stopping you in the street to ask if you were having tummy problems. But you rarely saw the whole picture when you were only one of the characters painted into the scene.

However, there were other things that the momentous encounter with Mary Connaught brought to the fore: The main one of these was that Maureen could go on no longer talking behind Stan's back. She frowned at this thought. *And why is that?* a small voice enquired from the deep recesses of her head.

Yes, why *was* that?

Maureen looked up at the stone buildings that hemmed her in, imagining the roads that lay beyond them—roads that led to other towns, other cities, even other countries—and she suddenly yearned for them and for the freedom to travel them, with the wind in her hair and not a care on her shoulders.

Mary Connaught reached the pavement at the other side of the road and looked determinedly in the Oxfam shop window.

And why couldn't she *do* that? Maureen wondered to herself—fully knowing the answer even before it came. Why *couldn't* she drift along the great Highway of Life with carefree abandon? Just one reason: Stan.

Exactly! said the small voice.

So why did she need to keep her own counsel after so many years of simply telling things the way they were?

Because, the small voice whispered (with Maureen suddenly realising that it was her own innermost thoughts given a kind of vocal substance), if she were going to get rid of him, she needed to appear in harmony with her husband in order to avoid attracting undue attention.

She was momentarily shocked. And then, slowly, a smile pulled at her mouth. The phrase "get rid of" was somehow exciting . . . as if Stan was no more than a troublesome rash that needed only a spot of Clearasil to banish forever—and Maureen nodded to herself, watching Mary Connaught reach the double frontage of Luddersedge Bakery and turn to give her a glance. Maureen waved, gave a big smile, and turned around, her back feeling straighter than it had done for some time.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A decision had been made . . . or, more accurately, acknowledged: It had actually been *made* a thousand trips to the allotment ago; a million snores ago; and a hundred unexciting and demeaning sessions of her husband's clammy and clumsy explorations of her body ago.

The truth was, indeed, out there: Stanley had to go.

And if he wasn't going to go of his own accord—which he clearly wasn't—well . . . then she would have to give him a helping hand.

Deciding to kill her husband after years of unconscious vacillation was like the sudden arrival last autumn at a decision to shift the sofa from against the back wall of the drawing room—where it had languished for as long as she could remember—over to beneath the window.

Complacency and a lack of adventure were the prime offenders and, just like it had been with the sofa, Maureen now saw lots of reasons why this was the obvious thing to do. More than that, it provided her with a frisson of excitement that had been missing from her life more or less since she and Stan had married in 1967.

The newspapers had called it the "summer of love"—either that year or the one before or after: Maureen couldn't exactly recall which—but for the newlywed Walkers it had been the year of *"business pretty much as usual."* In other words, the spectacle of the panting, groaning figure of her husband (slimmer then, it had to be said, but still carrying a stone or so too much flesh) climbing on board the good ship Maureen for a quick launch before rolling over into a sleep promoted by Black Sheep and interspersed with raucous snoring.

The snoring had sometimes grown so loud that Maureen had taken to pinching her husband's buttocks between her fingernails to interrupt his slumber. It proved to be highly effective and—Maureen now realised in the flush of her decision to do away with her resident market-gardener (who now carried some four stones more than was ideal for his age and height)—it was strangely enjoyable in a kind of sadistic way.

So, there was the snoring: that would end; and there were the monosyllabic conversations in the Conservative Club or The Three Pennies—those would stop. And all the half-baked get-rich-quick schemes and the long-promised Big One that would keep them in clothes-pegs and manure for the rest of their empty lives. Not to mention, of course, the daily intake of Black Sheep, the constant loamy smell of earth and outdoors that Stan wafted in front of her when he deigned to return home for his food, and—worst of all, she now realised—Stanley's occasional need to remove his striped pyjama bottoms and claim his conjugal rights while Maureen stared over his thrusting shoulders at the bedroom curtain blow-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing in the breeze from the open window . . . imagining, lying there with her legs spread wide, she was Tinkerbell in the Peter Pan story, preparing to fly off into the night and over the spires and sooty roofs of Luddersedge into a new and distant morning somewhere far away. Somewhere better.

Yes, it would be just like moving the sofa.

But how to do it was the question.

Eventually, having discounted garroting and knifing (she didn't have a gun, so shooting was a nonstarter), Maureen had almost lost hope—already starting to convince herself that the whole thing had been a pipe dream . . . the naive whimsy of a bored housewife, like something out of a macabre version of Mills & Boon—when BBC2 ran a film about a hit man hired to murder the wife of a wealthy industrialist.

The film was complex—all the more so because Stan spent the entire duration of it slouched in the easy chair by her side snoring so loudly that she kept missing pieces of dialogue—but it was the basic principle that attracted her. For the first time in a long time, she felt randy—really randy: not the dull ache she got watching Billy Roberts but something almost primal . . . accentuated by the fact that Stan was right by her side, oblivious to the drama unfolding before his closed eyes.

"I'm going to do this to you," Maureen whispered, nodding toward the TV, her face bathed in the flickering glow of the screen on which a man stealthily crept around the outside of a house that, in Luddersedge, would have been a stately home. "I'm going to hire a hit man. What do you say to that?"

Stan snuffled and moved his head to one side before resuming his cacophonous drone.

The following day, with Stan already gone for a full session at the allotment, his pack-up of tuna-and-mayonnaise sandwiches in his little Tupperware container, Maureen did the dishes while she stared out of the window and wondered where she should go to hire someone to kill her husband.

Somehow, the prospect seemed daunting.

What went on in America—a fabled land that Maureen had never visited—seemed hard to translate in English terms. And even harder to translate in terms of Luddersedge.

It was like pop music, she mused, placing her favourite floral-designed plate lovingly in the back of the draining rack beside the sink. Like "Twenty-four Hours From Tulsa" (she had always loved Gene Pitney)—you could never imagine it being "Twenty-Four Hours From . . .": from where? Tottenham? It had to begin with a "T" to preserve the alliteration (that wasn't how she thought of it, not knowing alliteration from an adverb, but she did recognise the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

need for a *tuh* sound to balance the one in "*tuh*wenty-four"). Torquay?

She sang the first line over the sound of Terry Wogan, while he rambled on about the DG in Auntie Beeb. "Own-lee twenty-four hours from Tor-quay . . . own-lee one day away from your harms . . ." She chuckled and dropped cereal spoons and a butter knife into the holder, trailing suds across the crockery already drying.

It was comical but it was serious, too. It was serious because it was impossible . . . ridiculous and impossible. Where on earth could she find a hit man around Luddersedge . . . or even in the comparative metropolises of Halifax and Burnley and Bradford? The watery autumn sunshine through the kitchen windows was already making the whole idea seem a nonsense, the idle dream of a woman too long in one place and far too long in one relationship; a relationship which had spawned nothing but familiarity and indifference.

The answer came, as answers so often do, when Maureen was quietly but firmly prepared to abandon the problem that had called for it.

It came with the clatter of the post-box in the front door and the dull plop of something landing in the hallway, resounding so emphatically over the sound of the radio that Maureen half expected Terry Wogan to comment: *Well, listeners, let's find out what's in the "Big Goody" that the postie's just dropped through the post-box of Luddersedge's very own Maureen Walker!*

The Big Goody in question was neither big nor good: It was only an update catalogue from Empire Stores. It lay on the mat with two letters at its base, looking briefly, for all the world, like a skull and crossbones. One of the letters, Maureen saw even as she stooped to pick them up, was a window envelope containing the gas bill. The other, a franked brown job, had Stan's name carefully typed in bold.

It was accepted in the Walker household that all post could be opened by whoever picked it off the mat in front of the door, no matter who it was addressed to. Thus it was that Maureen opened the official-looking letter that turned out to be from the local council.

The letter, from a clerk (of unknown gender and indecipherable signature) who went by the unlikely multisyllabic name of S. Willingtonton (surely a typo), said in formal tones which oozed insincere regret that, as had been "previously intimated," the "allotment facility" in which Stan "heretofore owned a one-sixth portion" was to be "compulsorily withdrawn" and sold to a "local consortium" for "extensive redevelopment" by their (unnamed) client. Stan would be, S. Willingtonton continued, "duly recompensed." It closed with (a) a request for Stan to contact the council

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

offices as soon as possible and (b) the assurance that the author remained—"sincerely," no less—Stan's.

She clutched the single sheet of paper in a quivering hand and smiled up at the ceiling.

Her husband's beloved allotment was soon to be no more and he was about to become depressed. *Very* depressed. Moreover, though he did not yet know it, he was about to become suicidal.

Maureen had her hit man—it was Stanley himself.

The next day was a maelstrom of activity for the soon-to-be-widowed Maureen Walker, but then speed was essential.

Clearly, Stan could not be allowed to see the letter. Even a man as docile as Stanley Walker would be spurred to frenetic activity by the prospect of losing all that he held dear in life. Telephone calls would be made and, perhaps (God forbid), in the face of organised resistance on the part of the gardeners affected, the council might even reconsider its decision.

The letter therefore duly disappeared into the labyrinthine recesses of Maureen's handbag, a shadowy and even hostile (being overtly feminine) terrain of mirrors and lipsticks and thick bandages with flyaway wings that Maureen inserted into her pants for a few days every month. It was a domain into which Stan seldom ventured unless pressed.

However, if Stan were to be rendered so uncharacteristically distraught, Maureen reasoned that the letter from S. Willingtonton—effectively her husband's suicide note—would not realistically be sat upon for too long. For the scenario she had concocted to work, he must receive it and he must take action immediately, while the balance of his mind was on the blink (or whatever they usually said in such cases).

Poison was the answer. And, with Stan's allotment shed undoubtedly containing all manner of suitable candidates for the job—slug pellets, greenfly sprays, and other assorted insecticides—Maureen recognised an almost comical irony in the situation: An enemy for so long, the allotment was proving to be the means of her very salvation.

How to administer the answer to her prayers, however, posed something of a problem . . . but not for long. The solution, when it came, brought with it a pleasantly appropriate subtext: It would be in a healthy glass of Masham's finest. Stan would be put to rights by a Black Sheep.

Who done it? Maureen mused to herself as she sat in bed on the night of the fateful letter's arrival, with her husband happily snoring by her side, oblivious to the trip he was about to make out of her life forever. *Ewe* done it!

It was all she could do to keep from laughing out loud. But she

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

didn't think that would be either appropriate or fair: After all, letting him sleep undisturbed, even without the usual pinching of the fleshy pads masquerading as Stan's buttocks, was tantamount to a last meal. Let him enjoy it.

The small puzzle as to how Maureen might gain access to Stan's allotment shed without Stan being there was also neatly and unexpectedly solved the next morning when Stan announced over his breakfast that he wouldn't be needing his customary pack-up because he had to go into Leeds. Maureen didn't ask what the reason for this expedition might be: She didn't believe in looking a gift horse in the mouth and, anyway, Stan occasionally made the trip to Leeds when something was needed for his allotment. (They had shops there that actually catered for the devoted gardener, their shelves replete with all manner of equipment and tools . . . not to mention a healthy supply of poisonous substances: Maureen hoped that Stan already had plenty of these in his shed.)

"Will you be coming straight back?" she asked, hardly daring to hope too much for the response she wanted. "I mean, do you want me to make you some sandwiches for later in the afternoon?"

Stan shook his head silently and spooned sugar into his pot of tea. Without even looking up from his *Sun* newspaper, Stan explained that he would get something in Leeds.

Maureen felt like doing a little dance but managed to maintain her self-control and, instead, put two more pieces of bread into the toaster by means of celebration. "Getting something in Leeds" meant that Stan would call in at one of the pubs that served Black Sheep—he knew them all—but, more importantly as far as Maureen was concerned, it meant that his palate would, she hoped, already be so suitably fogged by the time she presented him with her "special" bottle that he might not notice any unusual additional ingredients . . . or, at least, not until it was too late.

Stan left the house for the ten o'clock Rochdale-to-Halifax bus (he would change for the Leeds bus in Halifax) and Maureen watched him walk along the path with something that might almost—almost—have been sadness, short-lived though it was.

The rain started as she finished the washing-up, further evidence—if any were needed, she thought—that the gods favoured her plans: The rain meant that any other would-be market gardeners would think twice before spending time in their allotment, so there shouldn't be too many (if any) witnesses to her visit. Even Stan was reluctant to venture out of the house in the rain and, for a moment, Maureen became concerned that the change in the weather might dissuade him from the trip to Leeds.

She sat on the bed watching out of the window until the bus came. She could see the top of it through the gardens across the street, though she couldn't see if anyone was standing at the stop.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

But the bus stopped—so there must have been someone there—and then, just to make sure, she waited a few minutes to see if Stan returned before setting out, her hands encased in a pair of light blue Marigold gloves and the shed key tucked safely in her coat pocket, on the first part of her mission.

By the time she reached Honeydew Lane, the rain had grown heavier and the skies across Luddersedge—and across the entire valley, Maureen reasoned, looking over to the horizon in each direction—were slate grey and menacing.

Maureen slipped through the metal gate, cringing at the sound of hinges in desperate need of a drop or two of oil, and made her way to Stan's section.

She passed the two other neat sections, with rows of trimmed plant-tops (whose identity Maureen neither knew nor cared) that appeared clonelike in their similarity, and felt a wave of animosity towards them. It seemed as though, as she passed them, they sniggered at her in the wind and she felt like running amongst them, kicking at them with her shoes and swinging with her bag, tearing them out of their loamy houses with a vicious strangulating hold inflicted by her light blue Marigolds. If she had not been so preoccupied with these thoughts of garden-murder, she might have wondered why the three plots across from these three neat ones were so comparatively uncared for.

But she didn't.

As she reached Stan's shed door and inserted the key into the old lock, Maureen felt her pulse quicken. When she was inside, amidst the sudden silence and the smell of creosote and earth, under the accusative eyes of hoes and rakes and spades, she felt even worse: She suddenly felt her bowels loosen. Must be nerves, she thought to herself, scanning the carefully lined-up bottles and cans on the shelf at the back of the shed. After all, weren't there lots of stories about crooks leaving a mess on the carpet of the homes they burgled? Maureen now had some sympathy for their situation.

She read the various labels, taking care to remind herself mentally every few minutes that under no circumstances must she remove the Marigolds, until she found what she wanted: EXTERMINATE!, an old, tall can whose title appeared on four separate lines—EXT, ERM, IN and ATE!. The label carried numerous warnings printed in bold red capital letters (DANGER!, CARE!, and CAUTION!) and the top around the cap had rusted. Trying to loosen the cap, Maureen doubted that this product was still being made, and she hoped (assuming she would eventually get inside) that the contents were still in good working order.

When the top finally succumbed to pressure, Maureen removed it fully and peered inside. There seemed to be plenty there for her purpose and, even better, EXTERMINATE! had no noticeable

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

smell. Of course, there was always a possibility that Stan was simply using the can to store some other potion—possibly one with few or no harmful effects to humans—but a quick glance across the shelf showed that Stan always used Sellotaped labels denoting the contents when those contents were different from the can containing them.

She replaced the cap, tightly, to make sure there could be no leakage into her pocket (even though she intended first wrapping the container in an old Netto's plastic bag) and checked around to make sure there was no evidence of her visit. Once satisfied, she pushed the shed door open slightly and peered out: The coast seemed clear—no doubt thanks to the continued rain—and, without further ado, she slipped out, closed and locked the door, and went on her way.

This time, the plants in the allotment rows did not snigger. This time they were still (though it was probably just that the wind had dropped) and altogether more respectful. "You're *all* going to die," she whispered into the rain, thinking of the council letter. "Every one of you."

Once she was safely back on Honeydew Lane, Maureen removed the Marigolds and walked down the hill to the Threshers on Eldershot Drive, where she bought three bottles of Black Sheep bitter. Then, pleased that she had not seen anyone that she knew (another vote of thanks for the rain!), she made her way back home.

The stage seemed to be pretty well set: Now all she needed was the star performer to return from his jaunt.

Maureen's star performer arrived back in the house at a little after four o'clock. Allowing for time spent each way on the bus and an hour or an hour and a half in the pub, he had been in Leeds for more than four hours: You could buy a lot of tools in four hours, Maureen thought. And so wasn't it a little surprising that he arrived back without so much as a single bag? Maybe so. But by this time, Maureen was concerned only with the job in hand.

Thinking ahead, she had realised that leaving the addition of EXTERMINATE! until the actual pouring of the beer itself left room for all kinds of unpleasant developments. Thus, with considerable dexterity, she had opened the bottle—carefully, without bending the cap too much out of shape—poured out a little of the beer, and topped it up with the special brew retrieved from Stan's shed. She had considered repeating the exercise with a second bottle (it could only be two at the most because she needed one "untreated" bottle for another purpose) but felt that one should be enough. Anyway, she had ensured a generous dose.

The cap had then been carefully replaced and tapped down with

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a small claw hammer Stan kept in the bureau drawer in the hall for when Maureen wanted pictures moved around.

Trying to think of all the things she needed to do had caused her head to ache, so Maureen had written them down on one of the sheets of paper by the phone—itemised thus:

* add poison to bottle and replace cap
* put bottles in pantry

(Stan hated his beer to be too cold, so the fridge was out of bounds.)

* give Stan a drink!

(After this particular item, Maureen assumed Stan would be dead although she refrained from any additional note to that effect but opted instead for the exclamation mark.)

* put bottle in dustbin
* pour out the contents of the spare bottle and leave it by the glass

(Maureen was particularly pleased with this point. Although she stood by her decision to add the poison to the bottle itself and not to the glass, she knew there would have to be a bottle alongside the dead man and she also knew that, although it was hoped that the whole thing would be an open-and-shut case, traces of the poison in the bottle—when the "victim" had drunk from a glass—would cause unnecessary suspicion.)

* make sure Stan's fingerprints are on the EXTERMINATE (She omitted the exclamation mark on this.) and leave the can beside the bottle and the glass
* leave the council letter by the bottle, can, and glass

Stan's first port of call on arriving home—with little more than a grunted acknowledgement of Maureen's presence—was the toilet. Interrupting the Niagra-like cacophony of his flow as it resounded through the house, Maureen shouted up to see if her husband would like a beer. The answer was an emphatic "Great!" followed by another stream of water (no doubt caused by excitement at the prospect of more beer or the need to make more room for same). The toilet flushed as Maureen took the treated bottle of Black Sheep from the pantry. She was opening it when Stan arrived in the kitchen behind her, an arrival announced by two things: the slurring noise of his feet and Stan's voice saying, "What's this?"

When Maureen turned around, Stan was frowning at her list of things to do . . . albeit, she was delighted to note, the wrong side.

"It's someone's telepho—"

"Sheila Hilton," Maureen said, springing across the room and doing her best to get the paper back without appearing to snatch it. She stuffed it into her pinny pocket and turned back to the table where Stan's final drink was already half poured. "I saw

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Jackie Cartwright the other day at the market in Tod—getting black pudding," she added, filling the lurking silence with unnecessary information that she knew would blank out Stan's concentration (and, more importantly, his curiosity). "And she said she'd call me with Sheila's number. Haven't seen her in years," she added, pouring the final drops from the bottle and squinting down at the now-full glass for any telltale signs.

Stan grunted, apparently satisfied with the explanation.

"Do you want a few crisps?" Maureen asked. "Or some nuts?" Considering the imminence of the condemned man's execution, nuts and crisps was as close as she could get to the obligatory "hearty meal."

Stan shook his head and plonked himself down at the table.

Maureen watched as he reached for the glass.

Stan looked at her as he raised the glass to his mouth.

Maureen knew that this was the moment beyond which there was no return: If she were to save her husband, now was the time to knock the glass from his hands. But by the time she had thought up an excuse for such a strange action (telling Stan that she had seen a wasp on the rim of the glass seemed like the favourite explanation), Stan had drunk half of the contents. He sat the glass on the table, looked at it for a moment, and then reached for it again, frowning.

"Something up with it?" she asked, hoping he could hear her voice above the drumming thunder of her pulse.

Stan didn't respond. He lifted the glass again and sniffed.

"Is it off?" Maureen enquired, keeping her voice calm.

Stan did one of his usual facial shrugs—a strange lifting of the nose and eyebrows—and put the glass to his mouth. He was halfway through the remaining beer when the glass dropped from his hands and he doubled over on the chair.

Maureen backed away against the cabinet where she kept her best blue-flowered crockery, wincing at the sound of the delicately positioned piles shifting as she hit the cupboard with her bottom.

Stan hit the floor jackknifed, his big hands anxiously kneading his stomach all the way and even when he was flat out.

The sound that Stan emitted was a long drawn-out groan, but not the kind of sleepy groan he gave when the alarm clock went off (always an alarm clock, even though the only place he ever had to go since leaving the buses was his damned allotment). This groan was the collective sigh of all the souls in hell bemoaning their eternal torment. It was the sound of organs deflating and dying, being seared into immediate submission by a concoction of age-old poison and bottled beer.

"I'll get the doctor," Maureen said, rushing out into the hall, keen to avoid the spectacle of her partner for these past three

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

decades and more melting into the checked and threadbare kitchen linoleum.

She lifted the phone and pretended to hit the buttons, staring at Stan as he writhed around. He called out again a couple of times—words and phrases that Maureen could not recognise—and then he began to howl. Maureen thought about switching on the radio to drown out the noise, so that Stan didn't attract attention from the neighbours, and then he went quiet. She ran back to the kitchen and knelt down beside him, thinking he might be gone, but when she rested a hand on his shoulder she could feel it shuddering deep down inside her husband's body, as though Stan were a road-digger. "Doctor's on his way, love," she said softly against his ear.

Stan nodded and gave a low whine.

He opened his eyes slowly and the shuddering stopped.

His stare moved slowly until it rested on Maureen's face. She raised her eyebrows, expecting him to say something . . . to maybe get to his feet and say, *Well, nice try old love: Now it's my turn!* . . . stretching his meaty hands out to her throat . . .

But none of that happened.

What did happen was that Stan's eyes locked on Maureen's and in that split instant she knew that he knew what she had done. Then, without another movement, he went. His eyes were still wide and still in the same position but the life just went from them . . . fell away from the body like a mist banished by the sun and captured on fast film for one of the nature programmes on the TV.

Maureen got to her feet and thought about doing something about the high-pitched hum she could hear . . . until she realised that she herself was making it. She clenched her teeth tightly and swallowed.

She got out her piece of paper and read the notes.

The bad bottle went into the peddle bin until she thought better of that and retrieved it to put it into the dustbin outside (along with the light blue Marigolds: a sudden afterthought, just to be on the safe side), beneath all the other stuff they'd thrown away over the past few days.

The contents of a second bottle went down the sink, flushed away by a long run of the cold tap, and the bottle went onto the table. (The third bottle, spared for a while, would languish in the fridge for a few weeks before being consigned, untouched and unused, to the bin long before its sell-by date.)

The letter from the council also went on the table.

She left the glass on the floor.

The poison (duly fingerprinted by Stan's limp right hand) went on the table next to the letter.

Then she went and looked out of the windows. Nobody was around.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Maureen went into the hall and phoned the police.

The interview with the police seemed to go well, as far as Maureen could judge these things. She felt she had displayed a suitable mixture of hysteria and disbelief, both of which, she was a little surprised to note, were fairly genuine.

All she kept saying was that she had no idea why her husband should do such a thing . . . explaining that she had left everything just as she had found it.

She tried to feel unconcerned when one of the officers carefully removed the glass, bottle, and EXTERMINATE!, placing them into polythene bags and labelling them.

It seemed to be an open-and-shut case, the detective explained, his voice dripping with regret. Her husband's allotment was his whole life—"No disrespect intended, Mrs. Walker," he had added, to which Maureen had first frowned and then nodded, with a dismissive wave of the hand—and the prospect of losing it had been too much to bear. Stan had brought a can of poison from his shed, mixed it with a glass of beer, and . . . "Bob's your uncle," he said. (Actually, none of Maureen's uncles was called Bob, but she didn't think that that mattered too much.)

The good thing, the detective (a very nice man with a very nice smile, Maureen thought with a slight colouring to her cheeks) assured her, was that Stan wouldn't have suffered . ... he was sure. He may well have been a nice man with a nice smile, Maureen thought, but he didn't know very much at all about drinking EXTERMINATE!

Would she be all right in the house overnight? (It was now after six o'clock and growing dark outside.) Maureen said that she would and, a little before seven, she was alone. Alone the way she would always be.

That night, she slept soundly.

The next morning, Maureen dressed as sombrely as she felt was appropriate and as frivolously as she felt she dare (considering her "unhappy" situation).

After a quick breakfast of Alpen and toast, Maureen left the house early and got the bus to Bradford, where she spent the day wandering around the shops and practising how she would respond to all the expressions of condolence she would have to endure.

Where the time went, she didn't know.

For lunch, she had egg and chips, bread and butter, two pots of tea, and a jam doughnut from a cafe in the market—it was greasy, a little on the tasteless side, and the doughnut was rock-hard, but to Maureen Walker (newly-made widow of the parish) it was a banquet fit for a queen . . . and all for less than two pounds.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

More shop-wandering (and practising) in the afternoon and then a visit to the cinema—alone: She felt so *daring!*—to see a film called *Dark City* that she thought might be a thriller, but she couldn't understand it: All it seemed to be was a load of buildings growing up out of the ground and then shrinking down into it again, and the ending showed them all out in outer space. Things had come a long way since the likes of Cary Grant and Alan Ladd and, in Maureen's opinion, the trip hadn't been worth the effort.

On the bus going home, Maureen realised that tomorrow she would have to make all the necessary arrangements. Staring out of the windows onto the black countryside, she tried to make a list in her head of how many people she would need to cater for . . . wondering whether to have a go at making the sandwiches herself or buying them in.

Letting herself into the house, she felt tired and, suddenly, just a little lost. It would pass: It was just the excitement of the past couple of days. She made sure the doors were well locked—going back to them twice to double-check—and made a cup of camomile tea to go to bed with. No sooner had she drained the last dregs, watching her foot stray under the covers into the cool of Stan's side of the bed, than she settled down and drifted off into a deep sleep in which she dreamt of buildings growing up all around her and hemming her in.

The next day, her second morning of freedom, Maureen slept in.

It was after nine o'clock when she was disturbed by a noise downstairs.

She opened her eyes wide and listened.

What had that been? Had it been the stealthy sound of a slippered foot on the stairs . . . the sound of her husband, returned from the morgue in Halifax General (a journey that had taken Stan a full day and a night to make), slurring along the lonely lanes to Luddersedge to arrive with the—

The postman! That was what it had been.

Maureen got out of bed, slipped into her slippers, and pulled on her dressing gown.

On the way downstairs, she could see the single letter on the doormat. Another brown job.

Maureen lifted it up.

Somewhere nearby, a car engine sounded . . . growing louder.

The letter wasn't even addressed to them but to *Luddersedge Development, Ltd.* . . . . in a swirling, italicised script, at their address for some reason. That disappointed Maureen. Here she was on the first day of the rest of her life and the whole thing had been kicked off with a mistake.

She shuffled the letter inside the envelope until another line

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

appeared above Luddersedge Development Ltd. The line read: *Stanley Walker Esq., Chairman.*

Maureen frowned.

She stretched and turned the envelope over, slitting it open with her finger and removing the single sheet.

As she scanned the letter, she noted that the car engine had stopped. It had stopped somewhere nearby.

Maureen read, "Good to meet you yesterday after so many conversations on the telephone," the letter began. It was from a firm of solicitors in Park Place, Leeds . . . someone called K. Broadhurst.

Maureen felt the first stirrings of anxiety.

The letter went on to congratulate Stanley and the three fellow members of his *(his! Stanley's?)* consortium on their acquisition of the allotment plots on Honeydew Lane. "As I pointed out yesterday, the proceeds of the eventual transaction" (K. Broadhurst continued) "will be considerable" and (he/she was delighted to inform Stan) the purchaser was now prepared to consider "a high-end six-figure sum, but one which was not expected to exceed £800,000." When payment to the council had been made—and their own fees deducted, K. Broadhurst seemed keen to point out—the resulting sum should be in the region of £550,000.

Maureen's eyes grew wider and wider as she finished the letter (the signature looked like it might be Kenneth Broadhurst, although the two words were little more than elongated squiggles) and then read it again.

It was The Big One: He had done it. Stanley had brought it off.

When the doorbell rang, Maureen had stopped wondering whether clinching The Big One could ever really be considered a sensible reason to drink a tipple of Black Sheep mixed with EXTERMINATE!

As she made her way to the front door she was worrying that perhaps she should have disposed of the bottle in someone else's dustbin. Or whether any EXTERMINATE! traces had rubbed off on her light-blue Marigolds.

Or even—Maureen thought almost idly as she fast-forwarded all the events of that fateful day—what the police might make of a man who was able to open a can of poison one-handed.

When she opened the door, Maureen was not surprised at all to see that the nice detective wasn't smiling today. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

A Wall Too High

by Edward D. Hoch

Edward D. Hoch's Michael Vlado stories are often based on real incidents concerning the Gypsy communities of Eastern Europe. Vlado's current adventure is no exception; it derives from accounts of the walls recently erected in towns in the Czech Republic to separate the Gypsies from their Czech neighbors. Mr. Hoch mixes an impossible-crime plot with an account of political events with customary skill.

"I understand you are a Gypsy king," the uniformed man addressed Michael Vlado, not without an edge of contempt in his voice. He was seated across the desk in an unadorned office fifty kilometers north of Prague. It was a sunny afternoon in early autumn, and Michael would rather have been back in the village with his wife and their horses.

He smiled, trying to cooperate with his inquisitor. "I am only a king to my people back in Romania. Here in the Czech Republic I am merely a tourist."

The man, taller than Michael, had slicked-back hair and a tiny black moustache. He said his name was Lieutenant Lyrik and he spoke German after learning that Michael's knowledge of the Czech language was limited. "More than a tourist. Our police computer lists you as a trouble-maker, an agent provocateur."

"Hardly that, Lieutenant! I have not traveled this distance to incite anyone to anything. As you must have guessed, I've come about the wall. The European Roma Rights Center in Budapest has commissioned me to act on its behalf, to request that the wall separating the Roma section of town from the rest be torn down at once."

"What you refer to as a wall on Masarak Street is no more than a fence."

Michael had dealt with this type of official before. It was never pleasant. "A seven-foot-high fence made of concrete?"

Lyrik shrugged. "There is a similar structure in Ústí nad Labem and that is called a fence too. You must realize that these Gypsies

©2000 by Edward D. Hoch

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

are criminals, beggars, thieves, and fortunetellers squatting in decrepit apartment buildings, usually without paying rent. Can we do nothing to protect the decent neighbors who live just across the street?"

Michael Vlado was growing impatient with this man. He had traveled from his village to do some good, not to hear a diatribe against the Roma. "You must know that seventy percent of Gypsy children in this country are shunted off to special schools for the mentally retarded. In many cases, their parents have been fired from their jobs, beaten, and killed. The police do nothing."

"What do you want?" the lieutenant asked. "Why have you been sent here?"

"The Roma Rights Center wants the walls here and in Ústí nad Labem torn down. They want the Gypsies free from segregation and persecution."

"This is strictly a local matter. You have no authority here." After a moment's thought he stood up. "But we do not wish to seem uncooperative. Let me speak to my superior."

Left alone, Michael let his eyes wander over the slate-gray walls and the framed photograph of the country's president, Václav Havel. The single window offered a view of the parking lot, and he noticed a uniformed officer checking his license plate and peering into the car. He wondered if they'd ask his permission to search it.

Presently Lieutenant Lyrik returned. He resumed his seat behind the desk and smiled. "I have been given permission to take you to the Gypsy quarter and show you the fence."

"Very good. That's what I wanted."

Michael followed along to the officer's car, where the man who'd been inspecting his vehicle joined them. "This is Sergeant Cista. He will accompany us," the lieutenant said. Cista was a grim sort who shook hands and then rested his palm on the holster flap of his pistol. Michael was given the front passenger seat and he was well aware that Cista was seated directly behind him with the weapon.

The small city's commercial and shopping district covered only a half-dozen blocks and within minutes they'd reached an area of decrepit apartment buildings, two stories in height. He saw at once that a solid concrete wall had been erected down the center of the wide street, effectively separating the apartment block from the two-family homes on the other side. As Lyrik started down the better side of the avenue, Michael said, "I'd like to visit the Roma side first."

"Very well." The lieutenant backed out, made a sharp turn, and then proceeded past the Gypsy apartments. Behind him, Michael heard the snap as Sergeant Cista opened the flap on his holster.

Some of the Gypsy women were on the sidewalk clustered in small groups. One older woman in a colorful skirt spit at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

police car as it went by. Further along there were a few men and boys, too, shouting their defiance at the wall. "Can you stop?" Michael asked. "I wish to speak with them."

"That's not allowed," was the answer.

"What about that woman?" He indicated a fair-skinned redhead in her thirties. "Surely she's not a Roma."

"Mrs. Autumn," Cista muttered from behind him.

"Is that her name?"

Lyrik snorted. "She is sent by an Irish relief agency to work with the Gypsies. We call her that because she comes every autumn."

"I'd like to meet her."

Lyrik dismissed the suggestion. "She's an agitator." They pulled around the end of the wall and started down the other side. "As you can see, this is no Berlin wall. Your Gypsies need merely to walk around it. But it does offer the neighbors some respite from their noise and rubbish."

He stopped the car and they got out. The wall rose higher than Michael's head, probably seven feet. As they approached it, Lyrik explained that it was constructed of cinder blocks with cement facing. Michael wondered how long it would be before graffiti began to appear on it.

Sergeant Cista had remained behind them near the car while Lyrik and Michael walked up to the wall. "Perhaps the noise and garbage you fear so much would be less if the children were not denied a proper education," Michael told the lieutenant, reaching out to touch the rough concrete of the wall.

Lyrik opened his mouth as if to reply when a sudden sound like the crack of a rifle reached them from the distance. Lieutenant Lyrik gasped and his right hand flew to his face. He sank to his knees and toppled forward into the wall. Michael could see blood on the pavement even before Sergeant Cista ran up and turned him over.

There was a bloody wound over Lyrik's right eye. Michael had no doubt that the shot had killed him instantly.

Cista's hand came up from his holster, holding the pistol he'd been so anxious to draw. "Back up," he ordered Michael.

"I didn't kill him. I have no weapon." Not knowing how well the sergeant understood him, he raised his hands above his head.

Cista unhooked the cell phone from Lyrik's belt and called for help. Already a few neighbors had ventured forth from the two-family homes that lined the street on this side of the wall. "I heard the shot," one man said. "The Gypsies killed him!"

Michael was kept well away from the body as an ambulance and police car arrived on the scene. The body was quickly removed as the gathering crowd increased in size, and Cista escorted a police

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

officer over to where Michael waited. "I am Captain Mulheim," the officer said briskly. "Do you wish to make a statement?" He was older and stouter than Lyrik had been, perhaps reflecting his higher rank.

"I have no statement to make. I'm sure you are aware that I came at the request of the European Roma Rights Center. Lieutenant Lyrik was showing me your wall when he was shot."

"By a bullet from the Gypsy side of the wall."

"We don't know that," Michael insisted. "I heard the shot but couldn't tell its direction."

The police captain glowered. "You will accompany me to headquarters while we check your story," he said, making it clear there was no room for negotiation.

Michael Vlado sat on a hard wooden bench for two hours outside Captain Mulheim's office. Finally, at five o'clock, he was summoned inside. "Your story checks out," the captain told him. "I also have the medical examiner's report. The fatal bullet passed through Lieutenant Lyrik's head and was not recovered, but it came from a high-powered rifle some distance away, probably equipped with a telescopic sight. An hour from now, at six o'clock, I am going on television to issue an ultimatum. If the killer of Lieutenant Lyrik does not surrender within twenty-four hours, the police and militia will clear all Gypsies from the apartments on Masarak Street. The message will also be broadcast by loudspeakers on the street."

"You can't do that," Michael said, trying to keep his voice under control.

"Can't?" The captain smiled. "You seem to forget that I am the law in this city. I have full authority in all criminal matters."

"Let me speak to the Rom. Let me get to the bottom of this."

"Certainly," Captain Mulheim said, getting to his feet. "You have twenty-four hours to deliver the murderer."

Michael left police headquarters and walked back several blocks through the decrepit city. To his eye, the area being protected from a Rom incursion was little better than the Gypsy section itself. The wall was not a matter of economics but rather of fear. As he passed the wall itself he could still see the stain of Lyrik's blood on the pavement where he'd fallen. Michael rounded the end of the wall and walked up to the first house. It was a two-story apartment like the others, although a broken front window on the second floor told him that apartment was probably unoccupied. From downstairs came the sound of off-key music, perhaps played on an accordian.

A young woman wearing a full red skirt came to the door, frowning at him. She had the dark features of a Gypsy, though

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

her manner almost suggested a Western upbringing. "Are you police?" she asked immediately. "They have already questioned us about the shooting."

"My name is Michael Vlado," he told her. "I have been sent by the European Roma Rights Center in Budapest. It's about the wall."

"You are Rom?"

"Yes."

"Come in," she said reluctantly, stepping aside. The outlines of her long legs were visible against the thin fabric of the skirt.

The music grew louder as he entered a small, neat living room. He saw at once that it was coming from two boys about nine or ten years old. The younger was playing a small violin while the other had an accordion. It was little more than a toy but he was coaxing passable music from it.

"These are your sons?"

"Yes."

"Your husband?"

"He is at work." She brushed the dark hair back from her face, then added, "I am Rosetta. My sons are Erik and Josef." She signaled to the boys. "Go practice in your room."

They disappeared through the kitchen. Michael sat down on the nearest chair. "They play well for children."

"Gypsies love music, but you must know that. They say a violin in the hands of a Gypsy produces purer and more passionate sounds than for anyone else."

"That is true," Michael agreed. Then, "I have disturbing news. The police captain, Mulheim, is threatening to clear this entire block if the killer of Lieutenant Lyrik does not surrender within twenty-four hours."

"Of course !" She showed a flash of anger. "We are easy people to blame for any crime. He sent you to tell us this?"

"No. You will learn it soon enough." Already, far in the distance, he could hear the blare of an approaching sound truck, its message not yet clear. He glanced toward the ceiling, where the sound of the children's music had resumed. "Does someone live upstairs?"

Rosetta shook her head. "It's empty. The children play there and practice their music."

"Josef shows great promise for his age. Is he around ten?"

"He is twelve. I know he looks younger. Sometimes we cannot afford the food a growing boy needs. His father beats him if he catches him begging in the streets with the other Rom children. He wants to support us through his own work, but that is not always possible."

"Do the police bother you?"

"All the time," she acknowledged. "But we are used to it. My husband says it is the price we must pay for living in the city."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"How many of you are living here?"

"About seventy. There were more, but the police harassment has driven many away. That is their goal, of course."

The sound truck was on the street now, blaring its message for all to hear.

Captain Mulheim had seen to it that the announcement was read in Czech, followed by a translation into Rom. Michael lifted the curtain on the front window and looked down the street. A few men and some women had come out of the apartments and were gathering in small groups. "I'd better go out there," he told her. "I may see you again later."

The Irish woman that Lyrik had pointed out to him had emerged from one of the houses and was pleading with the Rom to remain calm. One man, taller and bulkier than the rest, already held a slender dagger in his hand. "I am calm until they drive me from my home," he told anyone who would listen. "Then I am angry."

Others clustered around and when there was an opportunity Michael spoke to the Irish woman and introduced himself. "I'm glad they've sent someone," she told him. "I can't handle this alone." Up close he judged her age to be around forty, but the long red hair had given her a younger appearance when he saw her from the patrol car.

"The police call you Mrs. Autumn," he said.

"They usually call me worse than that. My name is Mary Baxter. Come inside where we can talk."

"Do you live here?"

"I stay in one of the empty apartments when I come each year."

"Is this a fairly stable Rom community?" Michael asked, following her up the steps to one of the apartments. The inside walls were greasy from years of cooking. Peeling paint hung from the ceiling.

She shrugged. "Some Gypsies are meant to wander. I do believe it is in their blood."

"My wife and I have lived in the same Romanian town for more than fifteen years. We have a farm where we raise horses."

"Ah, but you're here now, aren't you?" Mary Baxter said. "I imagine this position with the Roma Rights Center keeps you away from home much of the time. It is your own form of wandering."

"It is a new thing for me. But I admit to being away frequently. Perhaps you are right. But I'm interested in this particular community. Is there anyone you know who resents the wall enough to shoot a police officer over it?"

"Many."

He gestured out the window toward the man with the dagger. "That one?"

"His name is Mathias. He is their protector and he takes the job seriously."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Might he have killed the lieutenant?"

Mary Baxter shook her head. "That dagger is his weapon. I have never seen anyone on the block with a firearm."

He motioned toward the peeling paint. "This place needs work. The house at the end of the block is in much better shape."

"Rosetta Lacko. She has a husband and two fine children. They're not all that lucky. But I hope to find time to paint these walls while I'm here."

"Who lives upstairs?"

"Mathias."

"The one with the knife?"

"He doesn't worry me. Next year it'll be someone else."

"Why do you keep coming back?" Michael asked.

"Because the job is never finished, is it?"

"No," he agreed.

Mary Baxter prepared something for them to eat, and they talked into the evening hours. "Michael is an unusual name for a Rom," she observed.

"Not in Romania. I was named for their last king, deposed by the Communists after the war and still living in exile. We were ruled with an iron fist until recently."

"Sometimes I wish for a strong president here to keep the local police under control."

"I thought Václav Havel was a strong leader. He's highly regarded in other countries. Can't he control them?"

She shook her head. "Havel has lost much of his popularity with the Czech people. He seems to do nothing toward helping the Gypsies."

The conversation shifted to the murder of Lieutenant Lyrik, and who might have fired the fatal shot. "There aren't a great many men on the street," Michael observed. "Is there a tribal king?"

"The last one moved away. Rosetta's husband Bruno will probably replace him."

"Where does he work?"

"He has a booth at the fun fair on the outskirts of the city, one of those where you hit the target and win trinkets or stuffed animals. He should be home soon."

Michael glanced at his watch. "I must be going. I hadn't realized it was so late."

"Where will you stay?"

He smiled. "The Roma Rights Center arranged for a hotel room. I have two beds if you'd care to sleep in comfort for one night."

She smiled and shook her head. "It is a kind offer, but my place is here."

"When does Mathias return with his dagger?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"When he's so drunk I have to help him upstairs to his bed."

"Before I leave, could you show me the upstairs apartment? The side facing the wall?"

"Follow me."

She snapped on the stairway light and led him up to Mathias's place. The door was unlocked, and as they entered Michael could smell the odor of beer and stale tobacco smoke. He stood at the window for a moment, trying to gauge the angle down to the wall in the center of Masarak Street. "I need more light," he decided. "Could I return in the morning?"

"Certainly. It may be our last day here if the police drive us out."

"You don't think Lyrik's killer will confess?"

"Whoever did it, he is not a Gypsy. He is not here."

Michael looked again at his watch. "I really must leave. I'll be back in the morning."

She saw him to the door and he headed down the street the way he had come, nodding to some of the Gypsy families lounging in front of their apartments. Though it was after nine o'clock, Rosetta's children were still practicing on their instruments and she was seated on the front steps. As he stopped to say hello, a well-built man with glasses and a moustache loomed up beside her. "Bruno," she said, "this is the man from the Roma Rights Center that I told you about."

"Bruno Lacko," he said, extending his hand to Michael. "Rosetta tells me you've come to help."

"If I can. Mary—Mrs. Autumn—tells me you're in charge here."

"When I can be. I work long hours for my family."

"What is the feeling among your people? Might one of them have killed Lieutenant Lyrik?"

"In a fair fight, certainly. No one on this block would have fired a rifle at him. No one owns a rifle that I'm aware of."

Michael nodded. "I'd like to return tomorrow and take some measurements from your upstairs window to the wall. Would that be all right?"

"Certainly, so long as you make it before the police deadline. We don't know what will happen then."

Michael slept well in the strange bed and ate breakfast at the hotel. As he retraced his route to Masarak Street he was aware of the police cars slowly circling the blocks. One of them came to a stop at a corner, blocking his route across a street. The window rolled down and Captain Mulheim peered out.

"I did not expect you to be here still, Gypsy. At six this evening Masarak Street will not be a safe place."

"I'm hoping I can help settle this matter before your deadline. Would it be possible for me to examine the lieutenant's body?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mulheim shook his head. "It was cremated this morning. He had no wife or close relatives."

"Captain, I ask that you consult with me before moving against those Gypsies."

"I can make no promises," he said, and the car window slid silently shut.

Michael continued on his way, aware that he was never out of sight of at least one patrol car. He entered Masarak Street from the other end, but the street showed little difference when approached from that direction. The first adult he saw was Mary Baxter, directing children into a small van that he guessed must function as a school bus.

"You've come back," she said.

"Of course. Are these children schooled by the state?"

"Not so they learn anything. I've managed to enroll them in a private school for half days. We have to provide our own transportation, but it' s better than nothing."

Once the van pulled away from the curb, crowded to overflowing, she relaxed with a sigh. "I don't want them here this evening, in case there is violence. No one knows how serious the police are about evicting us."

"They're serious," he said, following her into the apartment. "If they are driven out, will you return to Ireland?"

"Not until Christmas, whatever happens. My husband—"

"Then there is a Mr. Autumn?"

She laughed. "Yes, there is. He teaches the autumn semester each year at Trinity College."

Michael stood by the front window, staring at the wall again. "Would you happen to have a ball of string or twine?"

"I think there's one in the kitchen. I'll get it."

She returned with it and they went upstairs together. "Is Mathias still here?" he asked quietly.

She nodded. "He came in late, and drunk as usual. He'll still be sleeping."

He followed her inside and opened the parlor window. They were just about opposite the spot where Lyrik had been shot. Hefting the ball of twine about the size of his fist, he said, "I'll see how my pitching arm is." Holding one end, he threw the ball out the window, aiming for the other side of the wall. Leaving a trail of twine as it unwound, the ball just cleared the seven-foot wall.

"What's all this?" a voice growled behind them.

It was Mathias, wearing a dirty nightshirt, his tall hulk filling the bedroom doorway. He had the dagger in his hand, as if facing some threatening intruder, but Mary quickly disarmed him. "You met Michael yesterday, Mathias," she reminded him. "He is trying to find out who killed the police officer."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

He grumbled something but returned to his bedroom. "Here," Michael said, handing the end of the twine to Mary. "Hold this while I go around to the other side of the wall."

He then hurried downstairs and circled the end of the wall to the other side. About halfway along he found the ball of twine, much reduced in size. He pulled it taut so that it just cleared the top of the seven-foot wall. If the fatal shot had been fired from Mathias's apartment, or any of the other second-floor rooms in mid block, this was the path it would have taken. Michael had been standing right next to the victim, and he remembered holding out his hand to touch the wall. They'd been thirty inches away from that wall, probably a bit less.

But that close to the wall, the fatal shot would have passed nearly a foot over their heads. Any lower and it wouldn't have cleared the wall at all. It was a simple matter of geometry. The wall was too high.

Michael backed up until he could see Mary Baxter in the apartment window, holding the end of the twine. He knew a high-powered rifle can be accurate at a distance of a mile or more, but there were no taller buildings even at that distance. There was nothing but sky, gray with the threat of approaching rain.

He tried reexamining the facts. There'd been the sound of a distant rifle shot and Lieutenant Lyrik had fallen dead. The fatal bullet could not have come from in front of him because of the height of the wall, but Sergeant Cista was behind them. Could he have killed his superior with a pistol shot?

No, because Lyrik was facing the wall at the time. There'd been no blood on the back of his head, only on the front, where he'd been hit over the right eye. Michael turned to the right, looking over the wall at the last house. It had been the first house when he entered the street the previous day, Rosetta and Bruno Lacko's apartment, with its empty second floor.

He tossed the ball of twine over the wall and walked around to retrieve it. "Drop the end," he called up to Mary. "I want to try it again down the block at Rosetta's place."

The children were at school but Michael found Rosetta hanging out the wash. Bruno was in the small kitchen, preparing to go off to his job at the fun fair. "What will you do with that ball of twine?" the man asked.

"I'm trying to determine where the fatal shot might have come from. I ran a line from Mary Baxter's second floor over the top of the wall where Lyrik was standing. Now I want to try it from here."

Bruno Lacko nodded. "I must go," he called to his wife. "I will return before five."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rosetta came in with her wash basket. "He doesn't want me alone if Captain Mulheim makes good on his threat."

"He cares about you," Michael said.

"He cares about all of us. Too much, I fear. If the police come as they threaten, Bruno will be standing in front of them, blocking their path. I worry about what will happen then."

Upstairs, in the empty apartment, he opened the window next to the broken one and hurled his ball of twine again, aiming down the street toward the center of the wall. This time his aim was a bit short. It hit the wall and came down on their side. "I'll go get it and throw it over," Rosetta said. "Stay here and hold the end. You can tell me where to put it."

He agreed and stood by the window with the end held firmly in hand. Out in the street, Rosetta hurried to pick up the end and then flipped it over the wall. He saw at once that she had not thrown it far enough along for a proper measurement and he sought out a way to help her. The end of the twine could be tied to something in the empty apartment and he could join her at the wall. But what?

He opened a closet door, thinking that even a clothes hook might serve as an anchor, and that was when he found it. A rifle, standing in the corner.

Rosetta watched him approach her with a grim expression written on his face. "I tied the twine to a hook in the closet," he told her. "I found something there."

"What do you mean."

"A rifle. Is it your husband's?"

She shook her head, confused. "Bruno never goes up there. Only the boys use it, for their practice."

"Could one of them, Josef perhaps, have fired the rifle? Is that how the window was broken?"

"That window was broken by a rock hurled by one of the boys across the street, before they put up the wall to protect them from us." She handed him the end of the twine. "Do your measurements. Tell me if a bullet from our rifle could have killed Lieutenant Lyrik."

He strode further down the wall but he saw at once that in order to clear the top a bullet would still have passed well above Lyrik's head. "No," he told her. "The fatal shot couldn't have come from over the wall. But it also couldn't have come from any other direction. Are you sure one of your boys couldn't have—"

"Come with me, Michael Vlado!" She walked quickly around the wall with long strides that he had difficulty matching. They climbed the stairs to the empty apartment. "Now show me this rifle."

He went to the closet and lifted it gently from the corner. She

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

took it from him, her concern vanishing, pointed it at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened. "My boys would have difficulty shooting anyone with this. It's an air rifle from Bruno's fun-fair booth. He brought it home for them months ago because it was broken and not worth fixing."

"I'm sorry," Michael told her. "I don't usually jump to conclusions like that."

Her mood turned somber again. "We are only a few hours from the police deadline. What will happen then?"

"Perhaps someone will come forward and confess."

She shook her head. "How is that possible? No one is guilty."

"That's true," he agreed, and left her standing alone in the empty apartment with a promise to return.

The rain had started by the time he reached the street, not the hard, driving sort that autumn sometimes brought to his home in the foothills of the Carpathians but a misty, sweeping shower that warned of worse to come. He bundled his jacket around him and saw at the opposite end of the block the sudden appearance of a police armored vehicle. Go away, he wanted to yell as if confronting the angel of death. It's not yet time! But instead he hurried along in the opposite direction.

It was the sight of Sergeant Cista parked in a police car across from his hotel that told Michael what he must do. The officer had obviously been assigned to keep track of him, and Michael made certain he was seen entering the place. Then he retrieved the raincoat from his luggage and left the hotel by a rear door. He came up to the police car from the rear and was into the front passenger seat before Cista knew what was happening.

"What are you doing?"

"You should keep your doors locked, Sergeant. I want to talk to you."

Cista squirmed about, trying to reach his holstered weapon, but Michael laid a hand on it first, yanking it free. "You don't need this. I only want to talk."

"I'm just following orders. I have nothing against the Gypsies."

"I know what happened at the wall yesterday."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Lyrik was standing too close to the wall to have been hit by a bullet from one of the Gypsy apartments. I know because I took measurements of the angles today. The bullet couldn't have come from behind, where you stood, because there was no blood on the back of his head. The wound was over his right eye, yet I was standing on his right side, shielding him from that direction."

The sergeant ran his tongue over dry lips. "What are you trying to say, that his murder was impossible?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Exactly. It was impossible, and therefore it didn't happen. Lieutenant Lyrik is still alive and you're going to take me to him."

The rain had let up by the time they reached the little farmhouse some distance from the city. With his raincoat bundled around his face, Michael was unrecognizable until Lyrik had already opened the door to admit Cista. Then he shoved his way inside, knocking the lieutenant to the floor. "Don't go for a gun," he warned. "We wouldn't want the report of your death to be proved correct after all."

Lyrik rolled over on the floor, cursing his sergeant. "You told him! Mulheim will have our heads for this!"

"No, no! He already knew!"

"How could he know, unless someone told him?"

"Someone told me today. Someone told me that no one could have killed you and they were right. Captain Mulheim said the fatal bullet passed through your head, yet there was no blood on the back of your head, only on the forehead. The bullet couldn't have passed through. I remembered too that I heard the shot a split-second before you grabbed your forehead and the blood appeared. A bullet from a high-powered rifle would travel faster than the sound. You had a capsule of blood hidden in your hand, and when one of Mulheim's men fired a shot in the air you squashed the capsule against your forehead and fell over. Sergeant Cista came running and the captain was summoned with an ambulance. I was kept away from the body, so I wouldn't discover that you were still alive. The whole thing was a plot on Mulheim's part. He wanted an excuse to rid that block of Gypsies."

"And he'll do it," Lyrik said with a smile. "In less than two hours."

Michael showed him the sergeant's 9 mm automatic pistol. "I have this now. And you're coming with us to Masarack Street."

It was a wild ride back to the city, but they reached the street with ten minutes to spare. Every Rom was outside, facing the police, and Mary Baxter stood at their front with Bruno Lacko, not twenty feet away from Captain Mulheim. Cista had to blow his horn to cut a path through the waiting police and militiamen.

Michael was the first out of the car, and Mulheim raised his pistol to face him.

"You arrived just in time for the evacuation," he said, "unless you've come to confess to Lyrik's murder yourself."

"Hardly that! I have Lieutenant Lyrik alive and well in this car, and you have a great deal of explaining to do."

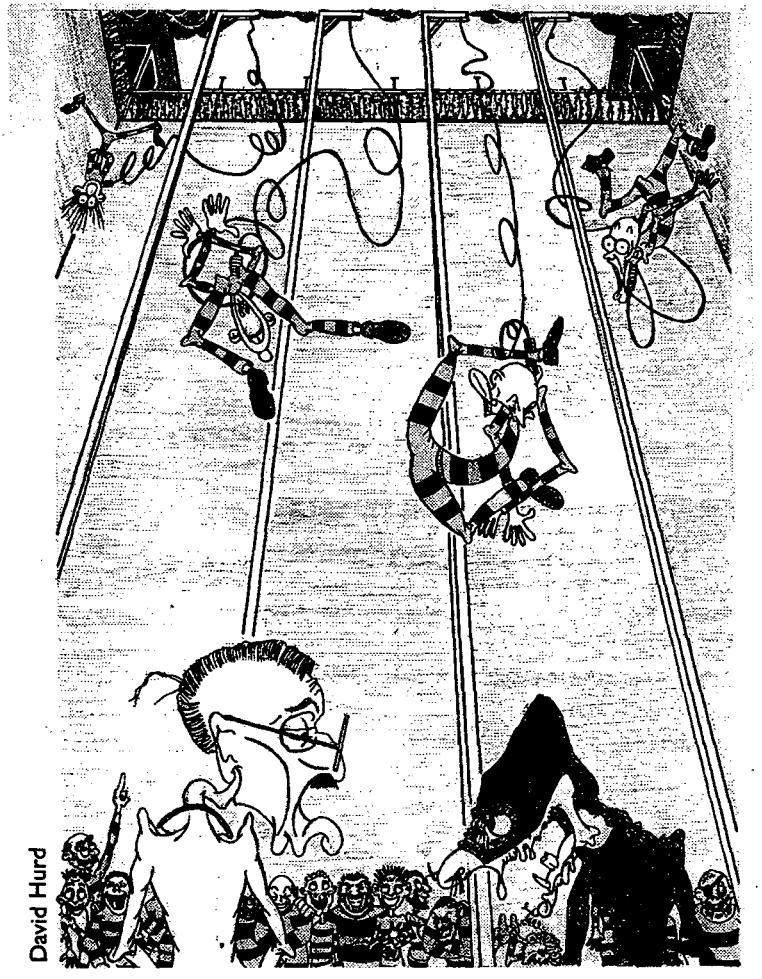
When they saw Lyrik, the residents of Masarak Street shouted and cheered, knowing the threat was ended. Captain Mulheim hesitated just an instant, perhaps contemplating the killing of them all. Then he turned and waved his men back. "There'll be other days, Mr. Vlado," he promised.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was not a promise he was fated to keep. In the morning, as Michael prepared to return home, Mary Baxter brought him the good news. President Havel and the government had negotiated the removal of the walls in the Gypsy sections of their city and Ústí nad Labem to the north. The wall was already being torn down and the Czech government had promised to give both cities money to improve social conditions. Meantime, a formal investigation had been opened into the faking of Lieutenant Lyrik's murder and the plot against the Gypsies of Masarak Street.

"If I'm ever in Ireland I'll visit you," Michael told her as he prepared to leave for home.

Mary Baxter smiled. "So long as it's not in autumn." ●



"You know, Warden, the men seem to find these hangings less depressing ever since we added the bungee cord."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Net Results by Katherine H. Brooks

"Let's take a vacation and camp in the forest,"
Said Natalie, picturing open-air meals,
With Frank proudly searching for vittles and firewood,
Inspired by the spirit a mountain man feels.
Upon their arrival she planted the tent poles,
And Frank was as helpless as husbands can get;
Then she tackled the gear and a cooler of goodies,
And strung from some branches a hammock of net.

"Get food!" she suggested. "The river we sighted
Is out by the trees, and it begs to be fished."
But Frank made it clear he was less than delighted—
That napping was all the adventure he wished,
And sinking himself in the folds of the netting,
He didn't get wood, and he didn't provide,
Till it looked to his wife like the sun would be setting,
With nothing to eat unless somebody tried.

So Natalie gathered the wood for the evening,
Defrosted some meat, and prepared for a feast,
And every so often she joggled her husband
And pleaded with him to eat dinner, at least.
When the steaks had been cooked and the coffee was perking,
She screamed with a voice like the squeal of a hog,
"Get up for your meal! I am weary of working
For someone who sleeps like a slug on a log."

Old Frank didn't budge, and his snoring grew louder.
"You win," said his wife, and dismantled the gear,
Then, dumping the steaks on his chest, in the hammock,
She muttered invectives that Frank couldn't hear.
"He's hardly a woodsman. I've had it," she fretted.
"He's shiftless and stupid. I've given up hope."
Then she twirled him around till his figure was netted,
And fastened securely the ends with a rope.

As Natalie started the car, and descended
The gravelly road by the light of the moon,
She thought of him lying there, snug and suspended,
And chuckled, "He looks like a giant cocoon!"
The shadows of evening crept over the forest.
Remains of the fire turned to embers, and sank.
The sound of the engine grew fainter and fainter,
And moonglow enveloped the hammock and Frank.

It's safe to assume that he wasn't a winner,
Trussed up like a turkey, or cheese in a wedge,
While a passel of animals, hungry for dinner,
Stood staring, with glittery eyes, from the edge.

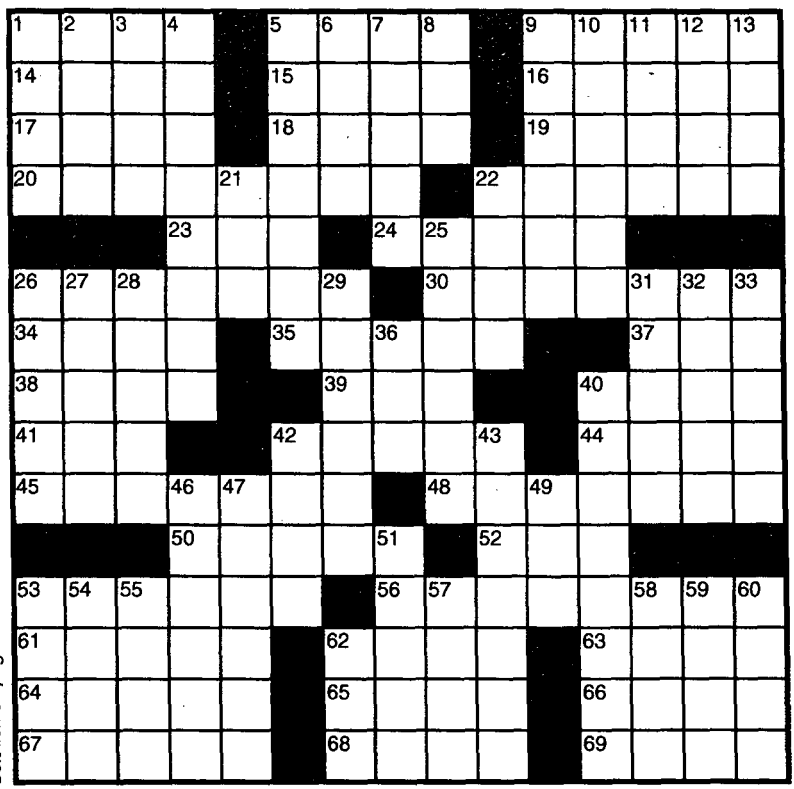
Poem © 2000 by Katherine H. Brooks

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Outis? or The Father of Mystery

by Leigh Woznick



Solution on page 108

ACROSS

1. Cuisine conductor
5. Childhood ammunition
9. _____ *League Murder* (Geller)
14. Dream of Deauville
15. Coliseum is one
16. Tropical wood
17. Seed outgrowth
18. Guthrie the younger
19. Falcon's homeland
20. FOSTER HOME

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

22. FROGPONDIANS' POND?
23. Hindustani sir
24. Madness of King Louis
26. KIDNAPPING THEORY
30. NEW YORK COTTAGE LOCALE
34. Chichen____
35. Con with cards
37. *Death ___ White Tie* (Marsh)
38. Sound of the greaspaint?
39. Goddess of dawn
40. P.D. James, for one
41. Wax (comb. form)
42. ____-Bloser language for kids
44. Of Man or Wight
45. Inuit
48. ANNUAL GRAVE VISITOR
50. Victimizes
52. ONE OF HIS PROTAGONISTS
53. Archimedes' shout
56. BREAKOUT HIT
61. Rodenberry's frontier
62. Frosh, four years later
63. Predatory beetle
64. THE GOOD DOCTOR
65. Screamer
66. Forked hammer
67. Write into law
68. Curveball addition
69. Site of manor murders (Julian Symons)

DOWN

1. Quick study
2. Ain't nothin' but a sandwich
3. For Christie, it's under the sun
4. Crystalline mineral
5. Ice cream and pickles?
6. Ear (comb. form)
7. Side dish
8. Before cone
9. Autobiography
10. Humbled
11. Shock
12. Aware
13. FOURTH WARD POLLS WARDEN?
21. Onassis, to Jackie
22. Inky image
25. Printing process
26. Sorceress of swine
27. Plains Indians
28. Arkansas mountains
29. Like some spoons
31. LAW MENTOR HENRY BECK
32. Miss Marple's pretense
33. Agrippina, to Nero
36. Charged atom
40. New Guinea archipelago
42. Crab larva
43. Lassoed
46. Medicine cabinet staple
47. Clark, to Jimmy
49. Scottish shire
51. Vegas way
53. Salinger writes her a letter
54. "ONCE——A MIDNIGHT DREARY"
55. ___ avis
57. Chinese oasis
58. Underminer of gardens
59. Author Hunter
60. Salamander
62. A. L. Baseball bosses

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Allen Davis

THE END OF THE PIER

by Alison White

Another wintry day. I used to see that as instant death to Southport, a seaside town. But not now. Even as the clouds thicken and darken over the sea, and the rain begins to come, things look good. Maybe to appreciate good you have to have tasted bad. And I can remember . . .

My phone was dead. I knew it was coming, red bills and warnings had made it clear, but I wanted the police, and fast. I'd have to walk round there, morning sickness or not. So I pulled on my coat, then, head down with hands pushed deep into my pockets, faced the bitterness of the morning wind.

Southport's police station on Albert Road was only a five-minute walk from my flat then, just off the promenade. But buffeted by the wind, and not feeling a hundred percent, it took a bit longer. I had a copy of the local paper in my hand, hoping that when I got there, they'd tell me there was a mistake, and they'd printed the wrong picture.

I'd heard the reports on radio that a body had been found. On a

©2000 by Alison White

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

stretch of land between the promenade and the new sea-wall area, close to the now derelict mini-fair. Murder, they said.

At the police station I unfolded the paper. "This picture," I said. "The dead man . . . is that definitely him?"

"It's a computer image," the officer explained. "And as good a likeness as we can get. Are you all right? You look very pale."

I shook my head. "I'm afraid I think I can help you."

"DO YOU KNOW THIS MAN?" the headline read. *". . . thought to be a local man, a familiar figure in the town."*

So familiar that no one knew his name. Brutally assaulted and left for dead. No wallet, no papers. Just a familiar face that nobody had come looking for.

"His name," I told the police, "is Barney Bluster. He had a flat in town . . . I'm not sure where. Just that it would be right, from the end of the pier." I smiled faintly, remembering.

"Known him long, have you?"

"We only met once," I explained. "Just a couple of weeks ago. But that's definitely him."

The police were lovely. They made me a cup of tea and let me tell them what I knew. Our only meeting, vivid in my mind.

I was just this side of despair when I first met Barney Bluster. Like him, I was seated early one evening, feeling sorry for myself, in a steaming cafe, its bright lights fighting valiantly against the fierce winter evening. The recent storms had wreaked flash floods and havoc in the town.

Usually it was lively to walk round. Away from Lord Street and the big shops, there were the little places. A jumble of coloured, plastic beach items and souvenirs. Novelties and gifts in the windows all year round. Pleasureland's cable cars, bobbing with the promise of summer fun. But now, some of the smaller shops stayed shuttered following the bad weather. As a rule, you could still walk halfway down the pier, but even that was closed off now while they checked it out after the storms. Not, I suppose, that many would choose to walk along it in that sort of weather. Only fools like me, who found it always fascinating. A jumble of iron,

Alison White is the author of dozens of short stories, many of which are mysteries—her favorite genre since she discovered Agatha Christie at the age of eleven. This most recent story for *EQMM* was published in December of 1998 in the U. K., in an anthology entitled *Northern Blood 3*. Ms. White has become a regular contributor to *EQMM;* we hope to have more of her work for you later in the year. †

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with the ghosts of summers past screeching on the wind, if you listened hard enough. If you cared.

I'd been drinking my coffee for about twenty minutes, making it last. Looking out of the window, which periodically steamed up, at the bleakness outside. I wiped away some of the condensation with my sleeve. With a *tsk* sound emanating from her lips, and aimed at me, the waitress bustled past. A vision in a multi-coloured nylon overall, she wiped the window herself, with a cloth specifically for that purpose.

Then I saw him. An elderly bloke with rheumy eyes, the sponge-soaked nose of alcohol abuse, and a dirty raincoat wasn't an obvious soulmate. We were both gloomy, yet saw the humour in the action of the waitress. For a second, our eyes flashed with shared laughter. Then we returned to our mugs and our private misery.

Still, I didn't expect to speak to him. Or even see him again. When I'd finished my coffee, I'd left the warmth and brightness of the muggy cafe and headed towards the promenade.

Even the seagulls screamed in protest at the bleakness of the day as they soared overhead. The promenade was decked with gazebos, Edwardian in style, their elegant ironwork immaculately painted. But dusty rain drizzled down the panes of glass, and the wind wrapped litter around the bench legs. Chip papers and crisp packets. I noticed some initials, freshly carved into the back of one of the benches with a brutality that didn't suit their declaration of love.

I'd always loved Southport. I was going to make it big and have a huge place here to come home to whenever I wanted. Except it hadn't quite turned out like that. That's the trouble with being a woman. On the stage, your looks fade and die quicker than a summer flower, as someone once said. Those younger and more beautiful are always on their way up. And okay, more talented too. But I'd always got by.

But even though I'd been keeping up the payments on my debts, I knew this time I wouldn't finish the panto season. I'd been lucky to get this last run, which wasn't even in Southport but out in the wilds of Lancashire. At thirty-seven (but only admitting to twenty-eight) I was okay if you put me at the back and slapped on the scarlet lips—I could high-kick with the best of them. But not when I was pregnant. So not for much longer.

Of course, there were ways of sorting these things out. And I wouldn't have been the first dancing girl to have done that. But I couldn't. The father? Well—let's just say I reached out one night and that's about as much as I can remember. No, it's not something to be proud of, but that would hardly be the child's fault, would it?

So that night, I left the cafe wondering what to do with my life

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and whether it was actually worth going on with. Most nights, I'd have been twenty-odd miles away by then, shrugging into my tights, sweaty bodies clashing in the cupboard they described as a "dressing room." No time to brood there. But it was my night off and I had time aplenty to just wander around.

When the rain came again, I was by an amusement arcade. I went in, ignoring the teenagers, eyes glazed by the flashing lights and the electronic music, and made my way through the darkness to the tea bar at the back. That was when I saw him again. The old man from the first cafe. Like me, he was lost. We acknowledged each other with a nod. And it would have ended there if I'd looked where I was going. But somehow, I tripped, and ended up on my backside on the floor, polystyrene cup in the air, scalding tea snaking across the floor towards him.

"That's what I call making an entrance," he said, momentarily stirred from his lethargy.

I wiggled my legs to check for damage before I got up. Still had a few weeks' kicking in me, didn't want to blow my last paychecks.

"I'll live," I pronounced, scrambling up. I'd given up on elegance long ago.

"Probably still play football," he murmured.

"Or dance." I turned to go and get another cup of tea but heard him catch his breath.

"Dance, did you say? On the stage?"

"Mmm. Not the Southport Theatre, though," I admitted before he got excited. "Just a little place. A 'Village Girl,' that's me. You know, chorus stuff in panto."

"Sit down." He indicated the chair opposite his. "I'll get you another drink. You rest your dancer's legs."

It wasn't a pickup. There was no flash of lewd interest in his eyes, just a flicker of interest in my life. And I grabbed at that. Who wouldn't? No one else cared.

He shuffled back, this time with a large tea in a plastic mug, and had even splashed out on a packet of biscuits. "For the shock," he explained, seeing my surprise. "Sugar is supposed to do something for it."

"Cheaper than booze, I suppose," I said, snapping a biscuit in two. "You interested in the theatre, then?"

He slurped his tea. His eyes, that once must have been almost turquoise, but were now yellow and bloodshot, focused somewhere off in the distance. "I was on the stage myself once. Barney Bluster. Comedian."

"Oh." I tried to look as though the name meant something to me, but he saw it didn't.

"I know," he said sadly. "But once . . . well, I was tipped to be a star. Even had a show on the pier. Not here, a little place in North

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Wales. But it was buzzing. Thirty years ago. Well before your time; you'd be just a girl then."

"Not now," I said.

"You're still dancing, that's something. You still get the calls."

"Not for much longer. I'm pregnant," I said, glad to be able to tell someone. Even if it was some old bloke I didn't know from Adam, I'd probably never see again.

"That's not good, then?"

"No."

"The father?"

"Forget it."

For a while he didn't speak, then sat back in his chair and stared into space again. Finally: "I envy you."

"My youth?" Which was laughable, but I presumed he was being comparative. It could be just about all he envied. About all there was.

"No," he said honestly. "The chances you still have. To make a difference. To make someone."

"It's easy to get that chance," I said. Even he could do that. But I kept that thought to myself, although he seemed to read it.

"Not so easy to see it through, though. Is that what you're agonising about?"

"I don't have the money to give me choices," I said. "That's my other problem. Debt."

"Ah."

That didn't look like an experience that had bypassed him. In fact, judging by the appearance of his clothes and his general unkempt air, I'd say he knew a damn sight more about it than me.

"I know about regret," he said slowly.

"Regret?"

"I told you, I was going to be a star."

"You had a pier show, that's a big star to some," I said, knowing it was true. "Even dancers with shiny tights and spangles are stars to the kids who come to watch our show. You can see it in the little girls' faces."

"You're right," he said. "That's how it should be. Everyone involved in the stage is part of the magic. But I didn't see it like that. It was only worth it at the top. I was going all the way to the London Palladium."

"What happened when you got there?" I gave him the benefit of the doubt. Assuming that he did.

But his eyes told me he knew I was being kind.

"I had a few good runs here and there but kept my eyes shut to everything else. I kicked a lot of good stuff out of the way. My ego didn't want to be just a part of things, it was all or nothing. So I ended up nothing. And alone."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I shuffled in my seat. He might only be drinking coffee now, but the smell of spirits on his breath indicated another liking to me. Again, he read my mind.

"That came later," he said. "When I realised what I'd done. But you know what? That doesn't help either."

"So what is it you're telling me?"

"Stop worrying about what you want," he said, "and take notice of what you've got."

While I mutinously stared down at my drink, which didn't appeal now anyway, he shuffled off towards one of the fruit machines.

Why should I even listen to him? Drunken old has-been. Not even that, more of a never-was. And I was wasting my night off. I decided to go home and watch TV while I could still afford the licence fee.

I'd seen the gang of teenage boys earlier on. Not an uncommon sight in a holiday town. They'd cluster round fruit machines and arcades, interested only in their own activities; I hadn't given them a second thought. Now they'd gathered by a shuttered kiosk, and as I left, I saw one of them look at me and nudge another.

So what? I'd done nothing wrong, and if they intended grabbing my bag, well, let them grab. My key was in my pocket and my bag would be no more use to them than it was to me. It was an empty decoration.

But as I passed, I saw how they were looking at me. And realised it wasn't my bag they were interested in.

"How much?" one said as I drew close. So that's what they'd mistaken me for.

I crossed the road, ignoring them, and cut down one of the side streets. The wind was noisy, and I didn't hear the footsteps behind me. Only the voices as I took another shortcut into a narrow back road.

"How much? Go on." There were two of them.

"Get lost," I said, trying to laugh it off, but my voice was shaky.

"Our money's as good as anyone else's. We saw you with that old bloke." The taller one sneered and pulled at one of the friendship bracelets he wore on each wrist, twirling the ends in his fingers, plaited threads of different colours. "Just me, then, love, eh? You might even enjoy it."

If we'd been on the promenade, I wouldn't have been afraid, but here, it was deserted. No traffic, just the backs of houses and a few shops, with bin bags left out to be emptied and bits of rubbish bouncing along in the wind.

"Scram," I said, knowing they sensed my fear.

"Oi!" Round the corner came a figure. "This way, quick!" Barney

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Bluster, God bless him. He was shouting backwards, into the other road.

"There's a bunch of lads got a woman cornered down here."

Whoever, if anyone, he was talking to wasn't the issue as the lads swore and ran off, calling me a few names as they did. I hurried towards Barney.

"Thanks," I said, unsteady on my feet now and seeing the scolding in his eyes. "I know," I agreed. "I should have known better. I was in a rush to get home."

He wiped his eye; suffering from the blast of cold night air, it had started to run. "It's not just you you're thinking about now. I'll walk you back."

So I linked my arm in his and we ambled along together. Some would say even that was stupid, but I knew it wasn't. Just then, I'd needed an angel, and though on the surface an unlikely candidate, Barney Bluster had been just that.

"Tell me about the friendship bracelet on that lad," the police officer said. "And what he looked like. It might be important."

"I remember he wore them on both wrists." I closed my eyes then and gave as detailed a description as I could, remembering his distinctive jacket too. Then I asked why.

"We found one of those bracelets near the body. If we find this boy, he might have nothing to do with it, of course. But everything helps."

I walked for a while before going home, stopping to look at the pier. The night I'd walked back with Barney, I'd asked where he lived.

"To the right as you come off the pier," he'd said, winking. "Having that pier show was my biggest thing ever. After that you measure everything from the pier. Any pier. It becomes a focal point." I knew what he meant.

On Southport's pier, you could still read the words, *"Seaward end of pier open 8 days a week Monday to Doomsday."* Doomsday had certainly come for Barney Bluster.

I walked down to where they'd found him. Blue and white police tape still flew in the wind on the land by the long-closed mini-fair. A complete contrast to the summer-busy Pleasureland. Left for dead, a crooked man by a crooked house, with the end of the pier in sight. Once more, the seagulls screamed overhead. I knew how they felt.

I cried off the panto that night, not in the mood for swaying about on stage and carrying a flower basket. Like Barney had said, it wasn't just me I had to think about now. Maybe I should find another way for my show to go on.

A few days later, a boy was charged with Barney's murder.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Later, the police thanked me. My description helped them find a boy wearing an identical bracelet to the one they found by the body. He also carried Barney's wallet and a key that fit his front door, apparently. Then he confessed.

"How did you find out where Barney lived?" I asked them.

"His landlord came forward when he saw the paper, like you. Thanks to both of you, we've got the person responsible. Mind you, we don't know what he was thinking of, going down there late at night. The lad followed him. Bluster should have known better."

I agreed, of course. Nobody had run around the corner to save Barney.

I never went back into panto. Decided to find another way to make my life work. I lived in a place I loved, and thought maybe I could still find stardust somewhere, if I kept my eyes open. And I realised when you do, it's surprising what you can see. This time, staring into a cafe rather than out of one, I saw a notice that help was wanted. Within the hour I had a job, and the flat above that went with it. Suddenly my debts weren't so much of a problem.

"I'm having a baby," I told Diane, the owner, as she buttered bread for sandwiches.

"I've got kids," she said. "If you're honest and hard-working, so what? We'll work it out. I like the look of you."

So I got to wear a nylon overall and wipe up crumbs. And you know what? I found I enjoyed it. It beats high-kicking when your joints ache.

"It must be lovely, living here all year round," tourists say dreamily. "You're lucky."

I know they're right. It's something I've been working on these last couple of years.

Today, we open up our refurbished cafe, Diane and me. We've got on so well, we've gone into full partnership now that I've finally got myself straight financially. Southport's on the up, there's a lot of money being ploughed into the place and the tourists are flocking here.

Diane loved my ideas for a theatre-themed diner-type place. We've got lots of posters on the walls for the local theatres. Advertising the present but not forgetting the past. Programmes, cast lists, props, and photographs are all around the place. Including me, grinning out from a poster bill as Cinderella, years ago, and, in a case near the counter, a glass slipper on a velvet cushion. Even my name badge says "Cinders." I'm not planning to go into a song and dance routine at the tables, but you never know. I can definitely feel the magic here.

I was in a house-clearance place looking for a few bits of cheap

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

furniture when I saw a dusty box full of memorabilia. One man's memories. One man's life.

"Top of the bill for the End of the Pier Show, it's Barney Bluster." Then lots of autographed photos of Barney in a checked sports jacket, grinning insanely, thirty years ago.

We've framed the biggest poster and put it with an autographed photo by a big silver star. All on the wall right at the back of the till. You can't miss it. There's another one of Barney on the door. I put it there this morning. The last one to go up, after I'd wiped the condensation off the windows. With a cloth and not my sleeve.

My son's excited now and pointing at the silver star. I scoop him up in my arms and carry him over to it before I take him to Diane's. She's looking after him while I'm on work duty today. We've got it all sorted out just fine.

"Look, Jake," I tell him, pointing at the photo up on the wall. "He's a very special man and we're never going to forget him. That's the famous Barney Bluster. He got to be a star." O

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

C	H	E	F	■	C	A	P	S	■	M	A	J	O	R
R	E	V	E	■	R	U	I	N	■	E	B	O	N	Y
A	R	I	L	■	A	R	L	O	■	M	A	L	T	A
M	O	L	D	A	V	I	A	■	B	O	S	T	O	N
■	■	■	S	R	I	■	F	O	L	I	E	■	■	■
C	O	O	P	I	N	G	■	F	O	R	D	H	A	M
I	T	Z	A	■	G	R	I	F	T	■	■	I	N	A
R	O	A	R	■	■	E	O	S	■	■	B	R	I	T
C	E	R	■	■	Z	A	N	E	R	■	I	S	L	E
E	S	K	I	M	O	S	■	T	O	A	S	T	E	R
■	■	■	P	R	E	Y	S	■	P	Y	M	■	■	■
E	U	R	E	K	A	■	T	H	E	R	A	V	E	N
S	P	A	C	E	■	G	R	A	D	■	R	O	V	E
M	O	R	A	N	■	M	I	M	I	■	C	L	A	W
E	N	A	C	T	■	S	P	I	N	■	K	E	N	T

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE SIESTA

by Edgar Brau

(Translated from the Spanish by Donald A. Yates)

Donald Yates has been a translator and contributor to *EQMM* ever since he was a very young man, and a friend of *EQMM*'s founding editor Fred Dannay. If mystery fiction was one of Mr. Yates's first passions, South American literature appears to have followed as a close second. The translator is a former professor of Spanish. He combines his interests here in the translation of a work by Edgar Brau, whom Mr. Yates describes as a promising young Argentinian writer. ¶

Seated on the dirt floor, the young boy wiped away the saliva from his lips and looked up at his grandfather, who was dozing in a chair facing the doorway. The clucking of the hens and the rattle of the dishes that his grandmother was washing in the back room were clearly carried on the hot, humid air. The sounds easily penetrated into the room through the loosely fitted slats of the door, making the old man's slumber seem imperturbable. The boy decided to try raising his voice a little.

"Grampa, tell me where you put the ball. Can you hear me?" he repeated wearily, his gaze cast down on the stick with which he was digging in the earthen floor.

A deep sigh was the only response from the grandfather, who finally relaxed completely as his head tilted forward.

"Don't make me think you're sleeping, Grampa," the boy said in a louder voice as he reached toward the chair.

But the door unexpectedly opened and the sudden light forced him to close his eyes.

"Don't bother your grandfather. Let him sleep," his grandmother said softly as she walked past him.

She went over to a mirrored closet door next to the metal-frame bed, which was where the boy slept at night. He lowered his head and kept on digging. The woman removed an armful of clothing from the closet and turned back. The light from the hallway filtered in through the half-closed door and outlined the figures of the old man and the boy.

©1992 by Edgar Brau

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The season of most oppressive heat had not yet arrived, but the woman's husband had already sought out the coolness of that mud-walled, thatch-roofed room at the back of the house next to the kitchen. The siesta was in part a compensation for his nights of unrelenting insomnia. There was a slight movement from the man in the chair and the boy began digging with more determination.

The woman leaned back against the closet door and looked down at the boy. He sensed her gaze and moved his body slightly, hiding the pile of dirt he had dug up from her view. The woman smiled tenderly and experienced again what she felt whenever her attention lingered on him—pity, regret. Less on the child's account, in truth, than for herself and her husband. This was their grandson, a creature with teary eyes who still soiled himself and had saliva constantly forming at the corners of his mouth. A kind of animal almost, the product of the whim of a passing stranger and the fear of spinsterhood of a simple country girl, her daughter. A daughter, moreover, from whom they had heard nothing for years until she suddenly reappeared to leave with them the fatherless child that no school would ever accept.

Her sense of pity now flowed back toward the child. She felt the urge to take him into her arms and console him for the misfortune that his limited intelligence probably could not perceive. But she did not. That noon the boy had broken a water jar with his ball and she and her husband had agreed to express their anger toward him at least until supper and then, as on so many other occasions, they would find a way to forgive him for his misdeed. She pressed the armful of clothes to her breast and went to the door.

"Gramma, please. My ball," a plaintive voice begged as she moved past the chair.

The woman turned, observed him for a moment, and only with great effort gave him a silent reproving look as she left the room.

When the sound of her footsteps died out at the far end of the hall, the child looked at his grandfather. A gentle snore was escaping from his half-opened mouth.

Grampa," he insisted in a drawn-out voice, his eyes fixed on the floor, "the ball. I want my ball, Grampa."

Silence.

The child paused for a moment while he sank nearly half the length of his stick into the ground. Then, while he struggled to sink the stick even further into the earth, he said in a soft voice: "If you won't give me the ball, will you tell me a story? Did you hear me, Grampa?"

The old man breathed heavily through his mouth, half-opened his eyes, coughed, and then fell back to sleep.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Grampa?" the boy insisted hopefully, because on other occasions his grandfather had pretended to be asleep and the boy had discovered the deception.

But this time the fixed expression on the sleeping man's face caused him to back down. He shifted his legs to one side and went back to playing with the stick.

Another long silence was marked only by the song of an oven bird somewhere outside that announced its arrival with fluttering and chirping.

"Grampa, you didn't tell me a story today," the boy persisted, but without raising his voice. "Before taking your nap, you have to tell me a story. You know that, Grampa."

The old man seemed for a moment to be chewing on something, then went on breathing through his mouth.

"The one about the lady and the bags, Grampa," he begged, encouraged by the movement of his grandfather's mouth. "Go ahead, Grampa. The one about the lady and the bags when you were a policeman," he said as he settled down at the foot of the chair.

Of all the stories that—unbeknownst to his wife—the grandfather would tell him before the siesta (all going back to the time when he was a police constable in the small town), this was the boy's favorite. He never tired of hearing it, even though he knew it by memory, because the old man had repeatedly resorted to it to ensure that some act of mischief wouldn't interrupt his afternoon rest.

The boy waited at the foot of the chair, his gaze fixed on his grandfather. Then he slowly returned to the spot where he had been seated before.

"All right, Grampa," he said in a less aggressive tone, as he resumed his game with the stick. "If you don't want to tell me, it doesn't make any difference. I remember it. I don't need you. I'll tell it myself. Did you hear?"

He paused to see what his grandfather's reaction would be. Then, since there was none, he lowered his head and began to speak.

"It was a long time ago. I was . . . by then a constable," he said, and then stopped to glance up. "A child, a baby had been stolen," he continued, now with a defiant edge to his voice, "and nobody had any leads. The baby's parents were out of their minds with worry. The chief of police called me in and said that I . . . I had to do the investigation and find out where the baby was. And so, well, I began to look into it."

The boy's speech abruptly broke off, but his lips continued forming words. Then, just as suddenly, his voice returned, and he alternated speech with pauses, looking for some response from his grandfather.

"It turned out to be a couple of drifters, homeless trash who lived in the streets." A glance. No response. He continued. "We really gave it good to these bums, but we learned nothing. I was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

beginning to get nervous, the chief was putting pressure on me. . . . On one of them I came across a scrap of paper with the name of a woman on it. Martha something or other. She must have had the baby. We found her but not the baby. We didn't hold back anything . . . she was crying all the time, but even when we slapped her good with a damp towel, she wouldn't talk. So I said to her, "Now we're really going to find a way to make you spill what you know . . ."

The child suddenly fell silent and looked up at his grandfather, who was snoring peacefully. He got up and went to the door and looked out through the crack. There was no one in the hall. He glanced back at his grandfather with a pensive, uneasy expression. Then he quietly opened the door and slipped outside. The bright light blinded him for a moment. When his eyes adjusted, he went down the hall to the kitchen, where the door stood half open. He glanced inside and looked around the room that his grandmother had tidied up, then went in. He stopped at the kitchen table and picked up from a napkin-covered bread basket a scrap of bread left over from lunch. Eating it, he went to the window that looked out onto the patio, where some sparrows were competing with the chickens for a few pieces of watermelon rind. He turned and went back to the table, where he paused, as if he had forgotten why he had gone into the kitchen.

"Now you're going to spill what you know," he repeated in his storytelling voice and went to one of the cupboards. Opening a door, he took out a green plastic garbage bag. He folded it up so that he could hide it in the small pocket of his shirt. Then, smiling excitedly, he went into the hall. The light dazzled him again. He covered his eyes and returned to the room. He stopped in front of the door, wolfed down the rest of the bread, and went in.

His grandfather was still sleeping, with his head now tilted over to one side. He closed the door noiselessly and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. Then he stood behind the chair, removed the garbage bag, and unfolded it. The old man's head was motionless; only his chest and stomach moved with his respiration. He opened the bag and held it up over the back of the chair and then, biting his lips and licking the saliva around his mouth, he began to cover the old man's head. When he had it lowered all the way down over his grandfather's body he flattened the edges against his back and his chest. Finally, seeing that everything was set up right, he stepped back a few feet and, in a commanding, drawn-out voice, said:

"Grampa. Now you're going to have to stop pretending that you're asleep and tell me where the ball is. You've got to confess, Grampa."

And he crossed his arms and waited.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

After a few moments, he said: "Grampa, if you don't confess, I'm not taking the bag off. Understand?"

The grandfather's breathing started to become disturbed.

"Well, Grampa, are you going to confess?" the boy said calmly.

The old man's head moved to an upright position and the edge of the bag separated from his body. The boy saw this and with a few gentle pats he flattened it out once again. Then he stepped back and crossed his arms once again.

"Grampa, I'm not in a hurry," he said in an unruffled tone after several moments had passed. To demonstrate this he went over to the mirror on the wardrobe door and looked at himself. His gaze shifted now and then to the reflection of his grandfather.

The old man was breathing with increasing difficulty, because the plastic bag had adhered to his sweat-covered neck and had shut off the passage of air. Suddenly, one of his hands raised and sought the open mouth. The boy noted this and believed that, as had happened with the woman in the story, his grandfather was beginning to struggle to find the air that he desperately needed. And it was after this frantic effort that, as his grandfather had told him, the confession came. For this reason, he waited where he stood for the moment to arrive when his grandfather would confess. He even urged him on with words he remembered from the story.

"Are you going to confess or do you want to suffocate?" he asked sharply, imitating the angry tone of voice that his grandfather used when he got to that part.

But the old man, it seemed, was hanging on. His hand had reached only as far as his neck, where it was resting, while the sound of his breathing had almost ceased.

The boy waited a few minutes in silence, surprised by his grandfather's power of resistance. Then finally, when silence fell, he moved away from the mirror and cautiously approached the chair. He stood before it, his eyes downcast, and flattened down the pile of dirt that he had dug up. Then he looked up at his grandfather.

He was amused at first by the way that the bag had adhered to his face. With his mouth and nostrils sealed by the green plastic, he seemed to be wearing a mask. Then he had a disturbing thought: All he had managed to do was to put his grandfather really to sleep. Now he'd surely not listen to him. He gazed at the old man for a moment, with no idea of what to do. There was no movement now of his chest or his stomach, and his motionless hand rested on the lower edge of the bag. Some of the white of his eyes showed through the plastic. They were half open, the way they often were when his grandfather was sleeping very soundly.

He moved now, annoyed, and reached out to remove the bag. But at that moment he heard someone approaching.

"Niki," his grandmother called out to him softly from the hall-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

way. Startled, the boy stepped back a few steps, still staring at his grandfather.

"Niki, the ball," the woman said in a confiding tone, opening the door partway.

On hearing that word, the grandfather's image was immediately erased from his sight. He rushed to the door and went out into the hall. His grandmother was waiting for him there. One hand was behind her back and with the other she motioned to him to be quiet. The boy approached her slowly, his gaze downcast.

"Will you promise that from now on you'll do what I tell you? Promise?" she asked as he stood before her.

Overcome with excitement, the child mumbled a few words and reached out to embrace his grandmother, who now offered him the ball. He took it in his hands and did a little dance around her as she looked at him happily.

"Now go quietly and get a plastic bag from the kitchen. We have to do some weeding in the flower bed out front," the woman said and turned to go out the front door.

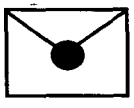
"Oh, yes! Yes, Gramma!" the boy exclaimed, still overjoyed at recovering his ball.

He ran to the kitchen and went to the cupboard door. But he stopped short when he opened it. He muttered something unintelligible, went back into the hall and, hushing himself with a finger raised to his lips, he approached the room where his grandfather was. He pushed the door open slowly and looked in. The old man remained in the same position. He tiptoed in and, placing the ball between his knees, began to pull off the green bag. After he removed it, he smoothed out his grandfather's hair, which had become disarranged, and, after placing a few gentle kisses on his forehead, said: "Just go on sleeping, Grampa. Don't wake up, all right? We have some work to do."

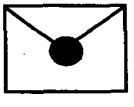
And he went out. ●

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

Please direct all changes of address and subscription questions to:



ELLERY QUEEN
P.O. Box 54052, Boulder, CO
80322-4052

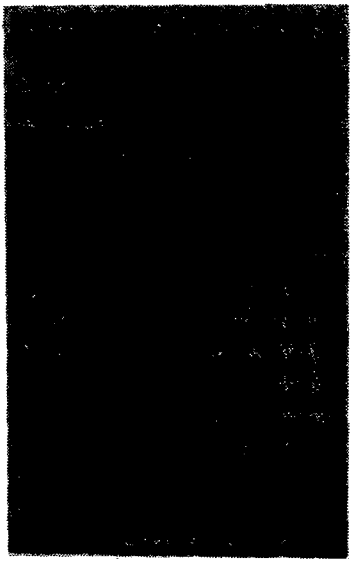


For change of address, please advise 6 to 8 weeks before moving.
Send your current mailing label with new address.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE 1ST SHORT STORY COLLECTION BY

CLARK HOWARD



CHALLENGE THE WIDOW-MAKER
And Other Stories of People in Peril

The multiple winner of EQMM Readers Awards presents 12 stories and novelettes

Horn Man	All the Heroes Are Dead	The Plateau
Puerto Rican Blues	Challenge the Widow-Maker	Animals
Scalplock	The Dakar Run	Custer's Ghost
Split Decisions	Mexican Triangle	The Dublin Eye

Limited cloth edition, signed and numbered by the author (ISBN: 1-885941-38-2), with additional story in separate pamphlet, $40.00; trade softcover (1-885941-40-4), $16.00.

Order from your mystery bookstore, or from the publisher. Include $2.25 s/h for the 1st book, $1.00 each additional. Virginia residents include 4.5 % sales tax. We accept Visa and MasterCard. Email us at CrippenL @Pilot.Infi.Net; visit our website at www.crippenlandru.com

CRIPPEN & LANDRU, P.O.B. 9315, DEPT. E, NORFOLK VA 23505

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art by Mark Evans

BLOOD PATHS

by Clark Howard

When Grant Kenner got out of bed, the first thing he did was look out the window to see what the weather was like. It was beautiful. A splendid spring day. Postcard pretty.

Kenner cursed quietly to himself. Pleasant weather always made it harder. Overcast skies, some fog, even a good steady downpour of rain would have been nice. Might have kept some of the protesters away, at least. And set a better scene for the whole thing.

Then another thought struck him. It wasn't going to be very enjoyable going down to breakfast this morning, either. This was the day his daughter, Susan, was going her own way in life, much to the disapproval of her mother, Kenner's wife, Elaine. There was tension between them.

Difficulties, Kenner decided, always seemed to come in bunches. Anything good came along, it was usually just a dribble.

In the bathroom, as he shaved, Kenner listened to the radio.

". . . in less than twelve hours," a news broadcaster said, "barring a federal court order or a commutation from the governor, husband and wife convicted killers Jack and Ginger Tatum are

©2000 by Clark Howard

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

scheduled to die in the electric chair at Scrubb State Prison." The reporter went on to summarize a story that everyone in the state and probably half the people in the nation had heard at least a dozen times.

More than a decade earlier, Jack and Ginger had been high-school sweethearts, Jack from a poor family, Ginger from affluence. Ginger's parents had, naturally, not approved, and after graduation insisted she enroll in an Ivy League college well removed from Jack's influence. The young lovers rebelled.

For money to run away together, Jack and Ginger tried to rob the safe in her father's study. The father caught them and held Jack at gunpoint while his wife summoned the police. Jack jumped the father, there was a struggle for the gun, and the father was shot.

Jack and Ginger fled in the new car Ginger had received as a graduation present. At a roadblock some hours later, there was a shootout with two sheriff's deputies and one of the officers was killed. The young couple escaped again. While on the run, they kidnapped a justice of the peace and forced him to marry them, then committed a series of convenience-store holdups, one of which resulted in yet another killing, this one a part-time clerk who rashly pulled a gun from under the cash register and was shot point-blank by Jack.

Although Ginger's father had survived his gunshot wound, when the couple was caught in a massive manhunt a week later they were charged with the deaths of the deputy and the store clerk. Tried and convicted in separate trials, they were both sentenced to death. Now, after ten years on their respective Death Rows, Jack and Ginger were facing imminent execution. Odds were, it was going to happen.

After his shave, and a shower, Kenner dressed and went downstairs to face whatever he had to face on the domestic front before going out to face what he had to face on the professional front. In the kitchen, he could tell by the look on his wife's face that the tension had exacerbated. Elaine, scrambling eggs at the stove, barely glanced at him, her expression cloudy, lips compressed. Toast and coffee were on the table, which was set only for two.

Twenty years ago this June, an author with an unusual talent appeared in the pages of *EQMM*, with a story that was to become a classic. Clark Howard's "Horn Man," from the June 2, 1980, issue was his first tale for this magazine, and it won that year's Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Short Story. Mr. Howard's work has maintained the highest standard over the past twenty years, and his voice continues to be one of the most original of all of our contributors. ¶

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Susan gone already?" Kenner asked, surprised there was no setting for her.

"No, she's putting a garment bag in her car. She said she wasn't hungry." When the eggs were ready, Elaine dished them up and brought the plates to the table. "I don't think I'll ever forgive you for this, Grant," she said evenly, an emotionless tone that Elaine used only for the most serious denunciations.

"Forgive *me?*" Kenner said. "For what?"

"You know very well for what. For what she's doing, that's for what."

"Elaine, you can't very well blame *me* for what *she* is doing," he said. "Susan is twenty-one years old. She's a grown woman making her own decisions. She knows what she's doing."

"You could stop her if you wanted to, Grant," his wife challenged. "You know it and I know it. She's been her daddy's girl all her life. One word of discouragement from you and she'd forget this ridiculous idea and go back to school. One more year and she'd have her degree—"

"And then what, Elaine?" Kenner asked, as nonconfrontationally as possible. "Teach elementary school for a few years, like you did? Then go back and get a master's degree, like you did? Become a high-school American history teacher and then a vice-principal, like you did?"

"And what, may I ask, is wrong with that?" Elaine continued to challenge. She was an especially attractive woman, with hair not particularly stylish but singularly suited to her, and eyes that were direct and always wide with interest. But in moments of anger, her comeliness was overshadowed by her own malevolence. This was one of those moments.

"There's nothing wrong with it, nothing at all," Kenner answered her protest. "But that's you, Elaine. That's not Susan."

"What's not Susan?" a voice asked from the doorway as their daughter entered the room. She was a younger, not quite as attractive version of her mother, with a firmer line of jaw that had come from her father. "I'm going to have to make you two eat separately if you don't stop arguing at the table," she said lightly, sitting down and taking a bite of her father's toast.

"This is *not* funny, young lady!" Elaine snapped. "You might very well be ruining your life."

"Well, it's mine to ruin, isn't it, Mother?" Susan replied in a much more subdued tone.

Elaine ignored Susan and drilled her husband with an unblinking stare. "Grant, you know how I feel about this. Are you going to support me on it or not?"

Kenner shook his head. "No, Elaine, I'm sorry, I'm not."

"Fine." Elaine tossed her napkin down and left the table. Sev-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

eral minutes later, the front door slammed and her car backed out of the driveway.

"Can't manage to stay out of trouble, can you, Dad?" Susan commented. "Not with you around, I can't," her father replied. Susan sighed heavily.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I really am. I just don't know how to act around her anymore."

"Sometimes I don't either," Grant agreed quietly, almost to himself. He thought of their bed upstairs and how infrequently it was used for anything except sleeping.

"I think the only way I could make her happy," Susan said, "is to let her run my life exactly the way she wants it to run."

"Your mother loves you, honey," Kenner rationalized. "And she's convinced that what you're doing is wrong for you. She wouldn't be much of a mother if she didn't try to make you see that."

"Do you think what I'm doing is wrong?"

"I have no idea," Kenner admitted. "We'll all just have to wait and see. But I know this: If *you* think it's right, then you owe it to yourself to try it—no matter what anybody says."

"Thanks, Daddy." Susan rose and kissed him on the cheek. "I think I'll leave now. I want to be early. First day and all."

"Good idea."

Susan left the kitchen, and presently her car, too, backed out of the drive.

Kenner sat in silence for a few minutes, finishing his coffee, wondering how she would do, trying to remember how it felt to be young and unsure, taking the first step on a new path.

But she would be all right, he told himself. He was sure she would.

He cleared the table, put the dishes in the dishwasher, and went out to his own car.

At Scrubb State Prison, Jack Tatum paced up and down in the execution holding cell.

"Hey, man," he said to a muscular young death-watch officer sitting outside the bars, "what time does the DWC get here?" He was asking about the deputy warden of custody, who was in charge of his execution.

"Can't say, Tatum," the officer answered. "He don't work for me."

"Well, when does Ginger get here from the women's prison?"

"Don't know that either," the officer replied.

"Am I going to be able to visit with her when she gets here?"

"Don't know."

"You don't know much of anything, do you?" Tatum said scornfully.

"I know one thing," the officer replied evenly. "I'll probably be here tomorrow and you won't."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I'm going to report that!" Tatum snapped. "You're not supposed to say *nothing* about me dying! No comments at all! That's a *rule!*" He stepped close to the bars and put a Marlboro between his lips. "Get your ass over here and light my cigarette," he ordered.

The officer sauntered over and fired up a Zippo for Tatum. As they stood close together, there was a striking difference in their appearance. The officer, a member of the elite prison death squad, was curly haired, tanned, buffed. Tatum was balding in front from a nervous habit of pulling at his hair when he worried, his body was flaccid from lack of exercise, and his complexion, from a decade without sunshine, resembled provolone.

Smoking now, the condemned man grew quiet and began to pace again. He wore soft felt slippers, so his movement was soundless. The cell he was in, thirty feet from the execution chamber, had a solid rear wall and was barred floor to ceiling on the other three sides. There was a metal bunk against one set of bars, a new cotton-ticking mattress and pillow on it, and a stainless-steel combination sink and toilet on the solid back wall. A cardboard box on the cement floor contained personal photographs and rubber-banded bundles of letters, all he had been allowed to bring with him from his old cell on Death Row. His legal papers from that cell were in a file box in the DWC's office, waiting to be turned over to the United Civil Liberties lawyer who had been handling Tatum's appeal at the federal level and was now rushing final pleas through the appellate courts as well as pursuing a commutation request with the governor.

As Tatum paced and smoked, his thoughts focused again on Ginger. He had not seen her, except in occasional television news clips, since he testified at her trial more than ten years earlier, testimony that he and Ginger's lawyers had hoped, by him saying that he had forced her to go with him, would result in a sentence less than death. But felony murder was felony murder, and Ginger had been packing the dead convenience-store clerk's pistol when they were finally caught, naked in bed in a Holiday Inn, by a small army of lawmen. By the time Ginger was tried, Jack had already been convicted and given the max so Ginger's jury saw no reason to let the little rich girl off after sentencing the poor boy to ride the lightning of Old Sparky. Ginger was given a death sentence also, and the poolroom and newsroom odds were that she would be the first woman electrocuted in the state in half a century.

But it was not the memory of her at the trial that surfaced in Jack's mind as he paced in his holding cell this morning, it was the memory of their last night together in that Holiday Inn. They had been intimate in an awkward but improving fashion since they were seventeen, but only in the month following high-school graduation, in a makeshift place fixed up in a shed behind Jack's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ramshackle home, did they begin to align themselves in a physical union so exact, so precise, that they were certain it had reached perfection. But they were wrong. Only after they had participated in murder, only after they had been hunted like animals by men with guns, only with the new emotions of panic, fear, and dread being introduced into their mutual desire, did they, that last night, reach a summit of gratification unlike any they could have imagined.

It was that last night, Tatum thought as he paced, that had been worth whatever price he had to pay: the killings, the long years on the Row, the electric chair—*anything*.

That had been his time in heaven. Now if he had to go to hell as payment, so be it.

Grant Kenner could see the milling crowd of people and the state-police cars from a full mile away as the highway dipped down into the barren valley where Scrubb State Prison was situated. As he got closer to the perimeter-fence gate, he was able to read some of the signs the people carried: SAVE JACK & GINGER! and ABOLISH THE CHAIR! and CAPITAL PUNISHMENT IS MURDER! and numerous others. In a smaller group, kept separate by a loose cordon of state troopers, were those with signs that read HAVE A SEAT, JACK! and EYE FOR AN EYE! and BURN, GINGER, BURN! At the moment, everyone appeared to be reasonably peaceful. But Kenner knew that in a few hours there would be twice as many people, maybe more, and their collective dispositions would become unruly. Especially after the media got there. Everyone would have a point—and everyone would want to make it, loud and clear, for the whole world.

As Kenner pulled up to the gate, the perimeter officer gave him a casual salute and said, "Morning, sir."

"Morning," said Kenner. "Any problems?"

"Not as long as these boys are here," the officer replied, bobbing his chin at the troopers.

"I'll have an extra half-dozen men down here beginning at noon anyway," Kenner told him, "just in case." As he was speaking, a state-police lieutenant walked over from a radio cruiser parked nearby.

"Morning, sir," he said, saluting the same way the gate officer had.

"Morning, Lieutenant. Crowd under control?"

"Peaceful and quiet," the lieutenant said, "just like good citizens ought to be. But we have standby officers ready to report if we need them."

"Sounds good. I'll have some of my officers down here around noon to help close to the gate. Make sure your men know they're welcome to come up to our officers' dining room for coffee and sandwiches whenever they have a break."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Thank you, sir. Appreciate that."

He saluted again, and Kenner drove on through the gate. He passed through a second, interior, perimeter fence, this one electrified and topped with four feet of razor wire. Then, a hundred yards farther along, he came to the walled prison itself, fronted by a large parking lot, one side for visitors, one side for personnel. The first three spaces in the latter section were marked WARDEN, DEPUTY WARDEN-CUSTODY, and DEPUTY WARDEN-ADMINISTRATION. Kenner parked in the middle space.

Scrubb State Prison's administrative offices were literally built into the wall of the prison, half of them outside, half inside, the two areas separated by a deadlock corridor that could be opened only one end at a time, by separate officers. Kenner's office was inside the wall. As he passed through it this morning, he suddenly realized that he had been walking that passageway for half his life—twenty-four years: first as a trainee corrections officer, then as a gate officer, tower officer, yard officer, tier officer, block officer, sergeant, lieutenant, captain, and finally deputy warden. He knew he would never be appointed warden; that always went to the administrative deputy, the one who knew about things like budgets, purchase orders, monthly reports, annual projections. Kenner knew about discipline, rules, punishment. And executions. As far as the warden's job was concerned, he didn't want it anyway. In another seven years, when he was fifty-five, he'd take his retirement, pick up a couple of soft consultant jobs with private security firms, buy himself a new cabin cruiser, and try to set a record for consecutive days of catching albacore.

Passing out of the deadlock corridor, Kenner entered the anteroom of his office, where Mildred Daley, his secretary, was at her desk.

"Morning, Millie," he said. "Everything on schedule?"

"Like clockwork," Mildred said. Already past her own retirement age, she had been a fixture at Scrubb for many years. Her husband and two sons, all corrections officers, had been taken hostage and killed in the bloody four-day riot that had occurred there during Kenner's fourth year on the job. No one had thought Millie would want to come to work at the prison after that, but she had. She told Kenner once it was the only place she could really stay close to her lost loved ones.

"What's the word from the holding cell?" Kenner asked.

"Last report was that Jack wanted to know if he was going to get to play kissy-face with Ginger when she gets here. Warden says it's your call."

Kenner shook his head. "Against policy. They'll each have separate areas to visit with their respective families. Blood relatives are allowed to visit briefly if they're both condemned, but not husbands and wives. Anyway, there's still a difference of opinion as to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

whether these two are even legally married. The justice of the peace *did* have a gun to his head."

"Is that our official position?"

"It is. What's the status on Ginger?"

"Lieutenant Geary and four death-watch officers went over to Waverly to get her. They have a state-police escort coming back." Waverly was the women's prison twenty miles away.

"Okay," Kenner said. "Get my execution staff in here for a run-through."

Kenner's execution staff, four officers of varying age and experience, sat in a tight semicircle around the front of his desk, each holding a clipboard which held a copy of the official execution schedule of Jack and Ginger Tatum.

"Okay," Kenner said to open the meeting, "barring any unexpected court order or possible commutation from the governor, Jack will go at six o'clock this evening and Ginger at seven. When Ginger arrives from Waverly, she will be kept, under Lieutenant Geary's control, in an isolation wing of the hospital that has been cleared out for her. After Jack's execution, she will be brought at once to the death-watch holding cell. Up until that time, everything on their schedule will be staggered timewise by an hour, except for the final family visits. Those will be from two to four for both of them.

"As usual, I will be in operational charge of the execution process, and Bob," he nodded at his assistant deputy warden of custody, Robert Simms, "will be in logistical command. Bob, let's go over the visits first."

"Right," said Simms. "Jack's will be in the Death Row visiting area, which is closed for the day to other visitors. Ginger's will be in the hospital dining room, which will be secured immediately after the noon meal. Both areas will be configured in standard final-visit layout: a long table down the middle of the room, a single chair on one side for the condemned person, four chairs on the opposite side to accommodate the maximum number of visitors allowed at one time. A death-watch officer will be stationed in a standing position at each end of the table throughout the visits. A third officer will be at the door on the visitors' side and will supervise the entry and exit of each visitor. One embrace and one kiss will be allowed at the beginning of the visit, one of each at the end. Hands must be kept on top of the table at all times, but may not touch. All visitors will be strip-searched prior to entering. No food or drink will be allowed during the visits. No smoking is allowed. As stated, the visits will begin at two o'clock this afternoon and terminate promptly at four o'clock with the condemned persons being taken back to their respective holding areas. Lieutenant Briar will be in charge of the entire procedure."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kenner looked at Lieutenant Edward Briar. "Ed, everything clear? Any questions?"

"I'm all set," said Briar. "I'll meet with my people at one o'clock to go over our checklist, and we'll begin strip-searching visitors at one-thirty. Three female officers will search women visitors in a separate area."

"Okay," said Kenner. "Bob, last meals?"

"Taken care of," said Simms. "Jack's will be served at four-thirty in his death-watch cell. He's ordered cheeseburgers, French fries, onion rings, a couple of chocolate shakes, and cherry pie *à la mode*. Ginger gets her meal at five-thirty in the hospital isolation wing. Her order was telephoned over from Waverly yesterday: New York cut steak cooked medium well, creamed asparagus, baked potato with sour cream and chives, dinner rolls, butter, and iced mint tea. Lieutenant Kramer is in charge of this detail."

Kenner turned to Lieutenant K. C. Kramer. "Casey, all set?"

"Yes, sir. Running smoothly. We sent an officer into town last night for the mint tea."

"Okay," Kenner nodded. "Showers and shaves?"

"Jack showers at five-fifteen, puts on a new set of clothes in the shower room, and is returned to his holding cell to be shaved," said Simms. "Prior to that, the barber will have shaved his right calf and his head. Jack's picked a lot of his hair out in front, but still has fairly thick hair in back. He's asked if we can just shave a spot large enough for the electrode."

"Negative," said Kenner. "Shave his whole head. They tried spot-shaving down in Florida a while back and the guy's hair caught on fire. Even the witnesses could smell it. The result was a lot of bad press."

Simms made a note on his clipboard. "What about Ginger?" he asked. "She showers at five forty-five under the watch of four female officers, then dresses in a new set of clothes sent over from Waverly. She hasn't arrived yet, but I understand from a telephone conversation with the warden over there that she's got a jungle of thick red hair."

"Shave her head," Kenner ordered. A couple of his staff looked down self-consciously. Kenner drummed his fingers, not entirely comfortable with the order.

"Ginger also requested through the warden at Waverly that she be allowed to wear some, uh, personal underwear that she's bringing with her today."

Kenner pursed his lips slightly and continued to drum his fingers silently. A thought of his daughter Susan flared in his mind. She and Ginger were in the same generation.

"Okay," he said. "But let's do it discreetly. Don't mention it to the public-relations officer. I don't want the press getting this." Kenner

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

turned to Lieutenant Beau Spangler. "You running this detail, Bo? Make sure the female officers handling Ginger do this underwear thing quietly. I'll pass the word to Lieutenant Geary myself."

"Yessir."

Kenner sat back in his big chair. "What else?"

"Clergymen," said Simms. "Ed will take charge of that. Each condemned person will have one clergyman in attendance from the end of the family visits all the way to the door of the death chamber."

"Okay. Witnesses?"

"That'll be Casey's job after the final meals. He and his crew will check credentials and ID, and escort everyone to assigned seating in the viewing room. Families of the condemned will sit on the left, families of the victims on the right, official witnesses, law enforcement representatives, and selected media will be in the middle."

Mildred stuck her head in the door. "Ginger Tatum just got here. Lieutenant Geary wants to know if you'd like to have coffee in the dining room before you see her?"

"Sure," said Kenner. "About ten minutes." His eyes swept the faces of his staff. "Anything else we need to deal with right now?" There was nothing. "Okay," said Kenner, "let's run this show nice and smoothly. Everybody check in with me either in person or by phone at three and five o'clock. Unless the warden decides differently, Bob and I will handle the last walks at six and seven."

He stood up, a signal that the staff meeting was over.

In the officers' dining room, Kenner drew a mug of coffee from a large self-serve urn and took it over to a table where Lieutenant Geary was sitting.

"Morning, Rachel," he said.

"Good morning, Grant." She looked up, smiling, a broad-shouldered woman with sensible short hair, only a trace of makeup, and steady russet eyes. The grey-and-green combination of her uniform was in her color season and gave her complexion a nice balance that some other female officers did not enjoy.

"Ginger settled in?" Kenner asked.

"Yes."

"How did the transfer from Waverly go?"

"Nice and easy. The state police kept the media vultures at bay, and Ginger put a sweater over her head to prevent pictures at the gate."

"What's she like?"

Rachel shrugged. "Pretty. Personable. But still a lot like any other female con. She's been inside long enough to have a convict mentality working. I get the impression she never really expected today to come."

"Do any of them?" Kenner asked rhetorically. He drummed his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fingers again. "Listen, I've given tentative permission for her to, uh, wear some kind of, uh, personal stuff—"

"The underwear she brought," Rachel said knowingly. "You're getting easy, Grant," she chided good-naturedly.

"Maybe I am," he admitted. "Her hair is bothering me, too. I don't particularly want to have her head shaved, but I don't want a burning incident either. Do you think we can get away with a patch shave?"

"I don't know," Rachel replied doubtfully. "She's got a real mop. If we could pull it back tightly, maybe braid it—I don't know."

"Work on it, will you?" Kenner asked. "Technically, Bo Spangler is heading up the detail for this, but for the most part he'll probably leave Ginger to the women officers."

"I'll see what I can do," Rachel said. "You going over to see her before or after her family visits?"

"Before, I think."

Now it was Rachel who drummed her fingers briefly. "How'd it go with Elaine today?" she asked.

"Not well," Kenner admitted. "She's determined not to accept Susan's decision on her future, and she's holding me responsible for it."

"You never encouraged Susan, did you?"

"No, but apparently I was expected to *dis*courage her." Kenner looked searchingly at Rachel Geary. "What would you have done?" he asked, almost an appeal.

"You're asking the wrong person," Rachel quickly demurred. "I've been through two unsuccessful marriages and have a teenage daughter from each of them that thinks I'm unreasonable and overprotective. On top of that, I just ended a longtime relationship with a man they both liked very much, so now they also think I'm mentally unstable and need therapy of some kind. I am the *last* person you need to ask for advice about domestic relations."

"You broke up with—what's his name, Don? The insurance man?" Kenner was staring incredulously at her.

"Yes, I did," she replied, a hint defensively.

"I thought you two were on the verge of getting married," Kenner said, perplexed.

"We were. Then the subject of my job came up. Don has been promoted to regional vice president. He didn't feel that a 'prison guard,' as he calls it, was the proper job for a regional vice president's wife to have. So," she shrugged her broad shoulders, "we called it off."

"You wouldn't give up your job for him?"

"No, why should I?" Almost miffed now. "My job is as important to me as his is to him. I put in a lot of hard work to get these lieutenant's bars. More hard work than the men have to put in—you know that as well as I do, Grant."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"I do know that," he agreed.

"No," she reiterated, "I won't give up my job for anyone." She stared off into space for a moment. "He had no right to ask me to do that."

Kenner reached over and briefly squeezed one of her hands. "Well, I'm sorry," he said earnestly. "Sorry it didn't work out for you."

Rachel fixed him in a curious stare. "Are you?" she asked quietly. "Are you really sorry?"

Kenner, surprised by her candor, parted his lips to speak, but found no appropriate words. Before he could conjure up any, his assistant deputy, Bob Simms, hurried up to him.

"Warden wants to see you, Grant. The size of the crowd at the front gate and along the outer fence is increasing very fast. We may not have access to enough state troopers to control it. And the men on the Row are starting to get a little unruly."

"Unruly how?"

"Just noise so far."

"All right." Kenner rose and drank the last of his coffee. "Send six officers out to the gate right away, Bob. I'll go see the warden. Then I'll run over to the Row."

"I'll take care of that other matter for you," Rachel Geary said, finishing her own coffee.

Leaving the dining room, the three parted.

Kenner's counterpart, Martin Raddis, the deputy warden of administration, was already in the warden's second-floor office when Kenner arrived.

"Everything on schedule?" the warden asked the moment Kenner entered.

"So far," Kenner replied. "What's up with the crowd?"

"Martin just drove in from his budget meeting with the auditors. You tell him, Martin."

"The trooper in charge at the outer-perimeter fence almost wasn't able to clear a path to the gate for me," Raddis said. "He told me the crowd's doubled in just the last hour. They've got all their standby officers on duty, but it doesn't look like that'll be enough. They're worried about how the final visitors and the witnesses will get in."

Kenner went to a wide picture window behind the warden's desk and raised a pair of high-powered binoculars that were always there. Through them, he could see across the main prison yard, on beyond the high wall, across the no-man's-land between the two razor-wire fences, to the perimeter gatehouse, which now presented a milling mob scene of people who not only were spreading out in both directions along the perimeter fence itself, but overflowing onto the two-lane highway, backing up traffic in both directions.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"What do you think, Grant?" the warden asked.

"I hate to say it," said Kenner, "but we're probably going to need the National Guard. I don't see any way around it." He looked at Raddis. "What do you think, Martin?"

"I agree. In addition to final visitors and witnesses, you've got a shift change in a few hours. The day shift has to be able to get out, and the night shift has to be able to get in. It'll put a dent in this month's budget if the shifts overlap." Raddis reduced every problem to dollars.

"What if I keep the day shift on duty until after the executions?" Kenner asked. "Can we afford an extra four hours' pay for everyone on days?"

Raddis shrugged. "If absolutely necessary," he said reluctantly.

"Take the money out of the public-relations budget," the warden groused. "That doesn't seem to be working anyway." He looked at Kenner. "Shall I ask the governor to call out the National Guard?"

"I think we have to." Kenner put down the binoculars and moved away from the window. "I'm going over to the Row. Simms says they're getting noisy."

The warden, shaking his head, picked up the phone. "Let's at least try to keep things under control inside," he said, "even if we can't outside."

"Yes, sir," Kenner and Raddis said in unison, and left.

In the hall, Raddis asked, "You seen Ginger yet?"

"No," said Kenner. "I'm going over there in a little while."

"You have all the fun," said Raddis, who was a bachelor and aware that Ginger Tatum had been sought as the first Death Row centerfold by several magazines.

"Yeah, right," said Kenner.

The two men parted and Kenner went back through the deadlock corridor, which he had come through to get to the warden's office, and left the inner-wall building to walk across a beautifully groomed inner yard intersected by two sidewalks which formed four squares of manicured lawn bordered by a myriad of seasonal flowers. Half a dozen convicts were at work clipping, trimming, and edging. In charge of them was a lean, gray-haired wife killer whose death sentence had been commuted the year Kenner became a corrections officer. He stood up from his gardening when Kenner approached.

"Morning, Mr. Kenner," he said.

"Morning, Franklin. How are you?"

"Arthritis is acting up again," the old convict said, rubbing his upper arm. "I'm going to need an easier job one of these days."

"Anytime you want it, Franklin," Kenner said. "You've earned it."

"I know. But I can't stand the thought of being away from my flowers." Franklin glanced over his shoulder. "Heading for the Row?"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Yes. Rumors of unrest."

"It's going to be a little more than that," Franklin said very quietly, barely moving his lips now in practiced convict fashion. Kenner said nothing. He could not ask Franklin for information; Franklin had to volunteer it. Any other way would have compromised Kenner's position of authority and involuntarily indebted him to Franklin. On the other hand, if Franklin *offered* information without being asked, Kenner would still be indebted to him, but it would be an obligation he voluntarily accepted rather than solicited. A fine line, but a line nevertheless. And in a maximum-security prison, such lines were vital.

So Kenner waited. And Franklin volunteered.

"Word I have is that a major disturbance will break out at four-thirty, when Jack gets his last meal. They're going to wreck the Row. It's a protest that's really for Ginger, but the thinking is that if the commotion causes the governor to commute Ginger, he'll automatically have to commute Jack."

"Interesting theory," Kenner allowed. "Not a chance of working, but still interesting." He nodded his thanks. "You let me know when you want that new job, and what it is."

"I'll want to sell this one," Franklin said. Good jobs in prison were customarily sold from convict to convict.

"No problem," Kenner told him. "Just make sure you get me someone who'll keep the place looking as good as you do."

"Check," said the old convict, and resumed his work.

When Kenner got to the wing that housed Death Row, he went through a mini-deadlock similar to the main corridor through the wall, where only one steel door at a time opened, and each was controlled by a separate officer. Some disorganized shouting could be heard by Kenner as soon as he passed the inner door. Lieutenant Bart Munro, the day-watch Row commander, came out of his office to meet Kenner.

"I hope you're not here to tell me that Tatum's been commuted," Munro said by way of greeting. "He's one of the biggest pains in the ass I've ever had in here and I definitely do not want him back."

"No commute so far," Kenner said, leading Munro back into the office. "But you may have a riot today at four-thirty."

"How good's the tip?" Munro asked, frowning.

"Get your fire hoses unrolled," Kenner instructed. "That's how good."

"Shit," said Munro. "I was planning to leave early today. My oldest boy is in a Little League tournament that begins this afternoon."

"We've also got an increasing crowd-control problem at the main gate," Kenner said, "so keep your day-shift crew on board until we see if any night-shift arrivals are delayed. We may keep both shifts here until after the executions anyway."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Okay," Munro said, disgruntled.

"Your boy pitching?" Kenner asked.

"Yeah."

"Well, listen, try to reach Chris if you want to. See if he can come in early." He was talking about Chris Jacoby, the night-watch Death Row lieutenant. "If he can get here to relieve you, go ahead and take off. We don't need two lieutenants here. But make sure you tell him about the possibility of trouble this afternoon, understand?"

"Yeah, sure. Thanks, Grant." As Kenner started to leave, Munro asked, "You seen Ginger yet?"

"No."

"She sure looked good in those TV clips last night. What a great rack. You going to let Tatum see her?"

"No."

"Good. Bastard doesn't deserve to."

"I'll check back with you about four," Kenner said, and left.

Rachel Geary was working with Ginger Tatum's lush red hair when Kenner got to the hospital isolation wing to see her. Not yet thirty, she had a drop-dead figure and was buffed but not muscular from years of in-cell aerobics. Wearing a tank top, she clearly had, as Bart Munro said, a great rack. Two other women officers stood nearby. All four of them were chitchatting about hair problems, but the conversation ceased when Kenner appeared.

"Ginger, this is Deputy Warden Kenner," Rachel introduced.

"Hi there, Mr. Kenner," said Ginger. Not a trace of nervousness. On the surface anyway.

"Hello, Ginger," Kenner said. "I'm here to see you more or less officially as head of custody for the prison, but also to find out if everything's going all right for you here and if there's anything I can do for you."

"Everything's okay," the condemned woman said. "I'm fine. Miss Geary and the other ladies are treating me real nice."

"How's the hair problem working out, Lieutenant?" Kenner asked Rachel.

"Not well, so far." Rachel brushed Ginger's mane back. "She's got enough hair to upholster a couch."

"Well, keep trying," Kenner said. "There must be something we can do to avoid—uh, you know."

Ginger put a hand on Kenner's arm, and all three officers tensed because it was a glaring violation of prison rules. But it was such a natural gesture that everyone, including Kenner, let it pass as Ginger began saying, "Listen, don't worry about it, Mr. Kenner. If I have to lose it, I have to lose it. Long as it's after my family visit is all I care about."

"It will be," Kenner assured her.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Will you be going with me, you know, tonight?" Ginger asked.

"Yes, that's part of my duties," Kenner said. "I'll be there to take care of any last messages you have, any notes or letters, that kind of thing. And if there's anything at all you need during the day—visitors added to your list, something else on your last meal, things like that—have Lieutenant Geary get in touch with me."

"Am I going to be able to say goodbye to Jack?" she asked. Kenner shook his head.

"I'm afraid not, Ginger. That's a regulation we just can't get around. If we made an exception in your case, convict litigation over it in the future would be endless."

"I understand," she said, removing her hand at last. Her bare arms, like the deep cleavage disappearing into her tank top, were lightly freckled. When she smiled, she had a dimple in each cheek. "Just tell him I said 'So long' then, I guess."

"I'll do that."

As he was leaving, Kenner took the other two women officers aside and asked quietly, "Has that, uh, matter of the, uh, underwear been taken care of?"

"Yes, sir. She'll go in lime-green panties and bra from Victoria's Secret. Under a prison-issue blouse and skirt, of course."

"Of course." Kenner cleared his throat. "All right. Carry on."

As he left, he thought: *Carry on?* What in hell made him say that? He sounded like some strait-laced British army colonel. Damn!

Between two and four in the afternoon, each of the condemned prisoners had their final family visits.

In the hospital wing's dining room, which was closed off immediately following the eleven-thirty lunch serving, Ginger visited with her father, mother, two older brothers, and one older sister. Kenner had approved an exception to the maximum four visitors to allow all of them to visit at once. The regular dining room furniture had been moved to the side walls, and a long serving table had been set lengthwise in the middle of the room, several clean white tablecloths spread to cover its full length, and folding chairs lined up on one side for the visitors. Ginger, wearing prison-issue skirt and blouse from Waverly, sat on a folding chair on the opposite side. She had been moved from the hospital isolation ward in shackles, handcuffs, and a waist chain, but they had been removed just outside the door before she was taken into where her visitors waited. One woman from among her escort officers stood at each end of the visiting table, two others were posted at the door, one inside, one outside. Ginger had made a request, through Rachel Geary, that her visitors be allowed at least soft drinks and, "You know, peanuts or pretzels or something," to break up the starkness of the bare white table. Kenner had granted the request and instructed the inmate

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

kitchen help to prepare an urn of Kool-Aid and half a dozen bowls of popcorn, along with paper cups and napkins.

In the Death Row wing, the visiting room was already configured for maximum-security screened visits, with a long counter running wall to wall, its undersection cemented to the floor, and a tightly interlaced metal grille extending from its countertop to the ceiling. A large room, which could accommodate a dozen condemned men having visits at one time, it was always reserved exclusively for the use of one person on the day of his execution, and a section of the grille was removed for final visits to allow the permitted kiss and embrace at the beginning and end of the two-hour period. There were vending machines for soft drinks and snacks on the visitor side, and on normal visiting days condemned men were allowed to bring something from the commissary supply in their cells if they chose to. But under the rules of no food or drink for final visits, as had been discussed at Kenner's staff meeting, the vending machines were usually disabled by closing and locking a security face on each of them, and the man awaiting execution could bring nothing into the room with him because he had nothing in the holding cell to bring. As Kenner had done with Ginger, however, and as was his policy with final visits, he usually relaxed the rule long enough for Death Row officers to supervise the purchase of snacks and drinks and to allow a reasonable amount to be passed to the prisoner. This was done for Jack Tatum, even though, as Lieutenant Bart Munro had said, Tatum had been an ongoing behavior problem for them during most of his decade on the Row, and Munro would have kept strictly to the book in his case. But it was Kenner's decision, and Kenner decided to allow it, particularly since Jack's visit was being kept simple anyway: just his widowed father and an older sister and her husband.

During the period when the visits were occuring, two emergency companies of National Guardsmen arrived and restored some semblance of order at and around the main prison gate. Kenner drove out to the gate and conferred with a colonel in charge of the troops, and was given assurance that crowd order would be maintained. Guardsmen were already separating the protesters from the supporters and moving them onto two different areas of the barren open plain across from the prison, while establishing a fifty-foot neutral zone between them.

On the way back to the walls, Kenner reported by radio to the warden that all was secure at the gate, then contacted Lieutenant Ed Briar, who was overseeing the final visits, and learned that both of them, now concluded, had transpired without incident except at the very end when Ginger's father had hyperventilated and had to be removed to a nearby vacant hospital room to be sta-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

bilized. On Jack's side, the condemned man had become somewhat defiant in heatedly demanding to be allowed to personally say goodbye to Ginger, and had to be forced back into his holding cell. He was now calm, however, his attorney and the prison chaplain were with him, and his last meal was on its way from the main kitchen on a steam cart.

When Kenner got back inside the walls and parked, before leaving the car, he radioed in to the Death Row lieutenant's desk. Chris Jacoby, the Death Row night lieutenant, answered.

"I guess you and Bart made a deal," Kenner said when he heard Jacoby's voice.

"Yeah, my little girl's got a dance recital in a couple weeks," said Jacoby. "Bart's going to pay me back the time then."

"He fill you in on the possible problem this afternoon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay. What's the situation up there at the moment?"

"Warming up. Listen—" Jacoby held the receiver toward the open door of his office. Through it, Kenner could hear a cacophony of cadencelike chants interspersed with sounds of aluminum cups being tapped in loud staccato against steel bars. The singsong incantation was a mixed verse of "NO MORE ELECTRIC CHAIR!" and "KILL ONE OF OURS, WE'LL KILL ONE OF YOURS!"

"Hear it?" Jacoby asked.

"I heard," said Kenner. "Got your hoses out?"

"Connected and ready."

"Okay. Let them make all the racket they want, but the first sign of anything burning—magazines, pillow cases, mattress ticking, anything—I want the cell it comes out of hosed down—totally. Not just a warning spray; I want the cell drenched. See if we can neutralize the protest before it builds up momentum. I'd like to keep it from reaching the general population if we can."

"Got you, Chief," said Jacoby. "Bart said you wanted the day shift to stay on. That still go?"

"Until further notice. I'll be in my office if you need me."

Kenner's assistant deputy, Bob Simms, was waiting when he got inside. "Media's just been let in," he told Kenner. "Warden's going to give his canned statement in conference room two, then turn it over to Laney for the rest of the day." Laney was Darlene Laney, the official prison spokesperson and public-relations supervisor, through whom all information about the execution schedule and events would, with the media as a conduit, begin to flow.

"Lawyers and ministers been advised where the media will be?"

"Yeah, I just called the death watch and had them pass the word."

"Make sure we have enough escort officers posted between the holding cell and the conference room, and the hospital wing and the conference room. I don't want any lawyers or preachers wan-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

dering around unescorted. Ginger's lawyer here?"

"Not yet," Simms shook his head. "He telephoned a couple times. Apparently he's at the state house making a final personal plea to the governor."

Kenner nodded. "Conference room one all set up for the witnesses to wait in?"

"Yes. Some of them are here already."

"What's the final count on victim witnesses?"

"Thirteen. Widow, two grown children, two brothers of the deputy sheriff. Widow, three grown children, husbands of two of them, two grandchildren of the clerk."

"Grandchildren? How old?"

"Girl nineteen, boy twenty."

Kenner shook his head dismally. If he had his way, no witnesses under age twenty-five would *ever* be permitted to watch a person die in the electric chair. Which, of course, would be discriminatory, unconstitutional, and who knew what else? But *nineteen* and *twenty?*

"Other witnesses finalized?" he asked, a little wearily.

"Yeah. Usual mix. Two media reps each from print and broadcast, two from the state law-enforcement association, one from the ACLU, one from the NCADP—"

"What's that?"

"National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. Headquartered in New York."

"Figures."

"Ginger's two older brothers will also be there, and Jack's older sister and her husband. The four official state witnesses are all civil servants who volunteered and were randomly selected by computer. That's it."

"Okay," Kenner said, sitting forward with his elbows on the desk. "I want Ginger to start over from the hospital at exactly five past six—as soon as we're sure we have Jack out of the holding cell and into the chamber anteroom. Both hearses are to be in place at the rear chamber anteroom exit by five-thirty. No cameras or media of any kind when the bodies are removed. As soon as Jack's body is in the hearse, get it out of here. I don't want pictures of a two-hearse convoy on the late news."

Kenner's phone rang. It was Jacoby, on the Row. "Burning items have been thrown from three cells," he reported. "We're getting ready to hose."

"Which three cells?" Kenner asked.

"Grappley, Modean, and Stippler."

"Baby rapers," said Kenner. All three were on the Row for sex murders of children. "Tell you what," he instructed Jacoby, "after you hose down their cells, get on the loudspeaker and announce

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that further incidents of burning will result in *all* cells being hosed. Maybe we can get Lindholm and Canteno and some of the other heavyweights to put a stop to it."

"Good idea," said Jacoby. "Might work." Lindholm was a big-time holdup man who had to kill a bank guard who got heroic on him, and Canteno was a mob hit man who whacked a guy in a restaurant where a former high-school teacher of his happened to be dining and subsequently identified him. Along with half a dozen other professional criminals, they were the heavyweights of Death Row, as opposed to the child murderers, spouse killers, junkies, psychopathic home invaders, and convenience store-service station stickup freaks who made up most of the rest of the condemned population. Rarely did someone in the lowlife ranks get in the face of a heavyweight. A person like the hit man Canteno would kill another inmate without blinking, and everyone knew it.

"Keep me posted," Kenner advised. "I'll come up there personally if you want me to, but I'd rather not make it look that important."

"I'll handle it, Chief," Jacoby assured him.

Another call came in, from Lieutenant Briar, who was now in the holding cell area. "Jack's just finished his last meal. The lawyer and minister who were with him have gone up to the conference room to do their dog-and-pony show for the media. Bo Spangler and his boys are standing by to give Jack his shave, take him down to the shower, and dress him out. The chamber crew just came through to get Old Sparky ready."

"Make sure Bo gets a diaper on Jack; I want the chair clean for Ginger. Call the supply room and have them send over some spray deodorant, too."

"Will do."

Kenner then called Rachel Geary in the hospital isolation wing. "How's it going?"

"No problems," Rachel said. "Her meal was just delivered and she's eating it. A Catholic priest from her family's parish is sitting with her. They're talking about movies."

"Were you able to fix her hair?"

"I'm afraid not." Ginger's voice lowered. "We'll have to do a full shave. But one of the other ladies has a baseball cap in her locker. Do you suppose Ginger could wear that? At least until she's being strapped in?"

"Sure," Kenner consented at once. "Tell her I'm sorry about her hair. No, wait, don't tell her that. It's not in my job description to be sorry."

"Tough guy. Listen, there's one other thing, Grant. She's asked if I can walk with her. I know I'm not part of the chamber detail, and I know everything's very precise and regimented down there, but—"

"You can go with her all the way up to the door, Rachel. And it's

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

very good of you to do it."

"Well, my daughters think I need therapy anyway, remember?"

"Yes, you told me that. Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Need therapy."

"All I need is a good man, Grant. That's all I've *ever* needed." She sighed quietly. "Listen, this personal talk is getting kind of heavy. I'll see you over there, okay?"

"Okay."

Kenner hung up, feeling an odd wave of sadness.

Both men looked up at the clock on the office wall. It was five-twenty. The phone rang again. It was Lieutenant Jacoby.

"The loudspeaker announcement worked," he reported. "Canteno and a couple of the other heavyweights issued a general threat that if anyone caused *their* cells to be hosed, the person wouldn't have to worry about waiting for Old Sparky. So everything's quiet now. Even the noise has stopped."

"Okay, Chris, thanks. Good work."

When Kenner relayed the information to Simms, the assistant deputy warden grunted quietly. "Death Row sure isn't what it used to be. Twenty years ago, when the death penalty was first reinstated, we would have had a full-scale disruption, everything that would burn would've been set on fire, toilets and sinks would've been smashed and the porcelain pieces thrown at officers, there would've been complete turmoil. Killers don't seem to have any loyalty to each other anymore. I think television in the cells changed everything."

"Whatever it was, I'm glad it happened," said Kenner. He looked at the clock again and stood up. "Come on, let's get it done."

Jack Tatum, fed, shaved, dressed in new prison issue, right trouser leg slit up the seam to the knee, paced up and down, speaking in clipped tones to his attorney and the chaplain, who had returned from the media room and stood outside the holding cell. He looked over as Kenner and Simms entered the area.

"How's Ginger doing?" he wanted to know at once.

"She's doing fine," Kenner said. He turned to the lawyer. "You'll have to say goodbye now, Counselor." Then to the death-watch officer, "Have the doctor and the rest of the chamber team come in."

"There's still some hope," the lawyer said to Tatum, as encouragingly as he could. "Your appeal for a stay of execution is with a federal judge, and your petition for a commutation is on the governor's desk right now." He and the condemned man shook hands through the bars. As the lawyer walked away, Tatum turned to Kenner.

"Ginger write me a letter, a note, anything like that?"

"No," Kenner said. He looked around as his six-man chamber team

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

entered, preceded by the prison doctor, who carried a small black bag. "He's all yours, Doc," Kenner told him, then nodded to the death-watch officer. "Open the holding cell." And to the senior officer of the chamber team, "Open the entryway and the chamber door."

Simms, with the hand radio to his ear, said, "Witnesses are going in."

Kenner nodded. He watched closely as the doctor entered the holding cell with two officers, unbuttoned Tatum's light blue cotton shirt, and removed a two-piece stethoscope from the black bag. With adhesive tape, he attached one section—the sound-detector head and an eighteen-inch length of tubing—to Tatum's chest, rebuttoning the shirt with the tubing hanging out. Then the doctor departed the cell and walked toward the death-chamber entryway door, which had now been opened.

Tatum started to put a final cigarette between his lips, changed his mind, and tossed it onto the bunk. "Didn't Ginger give you no kind of message at all for me?" he asked Kenner imploringly.

Kenner repeated what Ginger had told him. "She just said to tell you 'So long,' that was all."

Tatum looked dumbstruck. *"So long?* That's it? Just 'So long'?"

"That's it," replied Kenner. To an officer, he said, "Remove the box of personal belongings and turn them over to the chaplain." Tatum's photographs and bundled letters were given to the chaplain, a Presbyterian minister, who placed them on a table across the room from the holding cell.

Tatum was shaking his head in astonishment. "So long," he repeated. "After all this."

Kenner, Simms, the chaplain, and all six members of the chamber team looked at the condemned man in silence. He continued shaking his head, helpless, bewildered, a pale, lost being at the edge of eternity. Finally Kenner looked at a wall clock above the death-watch officer's desk. It was five-fifty.

"Time to go, Jack," he said quietly.

Two of the chamber team stepped into the holding cell and gently guided Tatum out of it. The team formed a cordon around him, two behind, one on each side, two in front. The chaplain stepped into the queue, Kenner went to the front of it. On a nod from Kenner, they all began to move, Simms bringing up the rear with the hand radio to his ear.

They proceeded through the entryway door into the room which housed the execution chamber. It stood like some ugly, monolithic mistake, its hatchway door opened all the way back, revealing the squat, solid-oak electric chair it held, a three-sided viewing window behind it covered by closed venetian blinds. A long length of rubber tubing, for the stethoscope, lay across one arm of the chair and extended through a port to the outside of the chamber.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Plug in the phone," Kenner ordered. An officer opened the door of a floor cabinet and removed a telephone which he set on top of the cabinet and plugged into a jack just above it. Kenner picked up the receiver and pressed the operator button. The prison switchboard responded on one ring.

"This is Deputy Warden Kenner in the execution chamber anteroom. Please verify that this line is in service to the governor's mansion and the clerk's office of the federal appeals court." All was silent while he waited for confirmation. "Thank you," he said after a moment, and hung up. As he stepped away, the officer who had plugged the phone in moved next to it and placed a hand on the receiver for immediate answering. "All right," said Kenner.

Three officers entered the chamber; each of them raised a blind on one side of the viewing window. Beyond the window, a sea of eyes widened as the witnesses looked into the chamber for the first time. The two officers outside the door of the chamber guided Tatum inside, turned him, and sat him in the chair. One of them attached the stethoscope tubing hanging from his shirt to the long length running through the chamber wall. Then they both stepped back out as the other three began strapping Tatum's arms, chest, and legs in place. Kenner entered the chamber and watched closely as an ankle electrode at the end of a thick black electrical cord was strapped in place on Tatum's right leg. Made of soft leather, with a natural sea-sponge lining that had been spread liberally with saline salve, this electrode was the return path of the current after it passed through the condemned person's body. When it was in place, Kenner knelt to inspect the fit. As he did so, the telephone rang in the antechamber.

Kenner rose quickly and squeezed past two officers to get out of the chamber. Behind him, he heard Jack Tatum say gleefully, "I knew it! I knew I'd get commuted! I knew I wouldn't go! Unstrap me!"

Kenner got to the telephone, which had already been answered by the officer next to it. Quickly taking the receiver, he said, "Deputy Warden Grant Kenner speaking." A pause as he listened intently. Then: "Yes, sir." Another pause, and: "Yes, sir. I understand, sir." A final pause, then: "Yes, sir. It's clear, sir. Yes, sir."

Kenner hung up. All eyes were on him as he moved over to the open door and back into the chamber. Jack Tatum was grinning at him like a madman. "Get me out of this goddamned chair, Kenner!" he demanded.

"Attach the head electrode," Kenner ordered the officer directly behind the chair.

"What?" Tatum shouted.

The officer quickly fitted to Tatum's shaved head a skullcap made of firmer leather than the ankle electrode, with a similar

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lining of natural sea sponge spread with saline salve, this one held in place by a mesh screening of copper wire for maximum conduction of the electricity.

"What the hell are you doing?" Tatum asked frantically, struggling against his restraints as the officer fastened a strap under his chin to hold the cap in place.

"Your execution will proceed as scheduled," Kenner said. "Attach the feeder," he told the officer.

A bolt was loosened in a spike on top of the skullcap, a bare six-ampere contact inserted, and the bolt retightened to hold it in place.

"But what about that call?" Tatum pleaded. The officers in the chamber filed out now and Kenner stepped behind the chair to inspect the head electrode. "Wasn't that call from the governor's office?" Tatum asked, nearing hysteria.

"Yes, it was." Kenner bent down to speak quietly in his ear. "But it wasn't about you, Jack. It was about Ginger. The governor has commuted her sentence to life in prison."

"What! But that can't be!"

Kenner stepped around the chair and snapped a soft leather mask in place over Tatum's face.

"How could he do that! It was all her idea! Everything we did!"

"Goodbye, Jack," said Kenner. He stepped to the door and out of the chamber.

"Wait a minute! She's even the one who killed the deputy! I was driving the car!"

An officer swung the big steel door—

"Wait a minute! Please wait a—!"

—closed, silencing the rest of Tatum's words.

Kenner moved to three officers who stood at an electrical panel with three switches on it. At his nod, each of them threw a switch. Only one switch was connected to the electric-chair generator, so the assigned officers never knew which of them activated the current.

In the chamber, twenty-four hundred volts of electricity, at five amps, surged into Jack Tatum's body, through his skull, for a full minute, and exited at his right ankle. He was unconscious in four milliseconds, which was twenty-four times faster than his central nervous system could record pain. Tatum's body pushed forward against the restraints that held him. After a full minute, the current stopped automatically, and the three switches on the control panel snapped back to their previous position.

With his stethoscope attached to the tubing running into the chamber, the doctor listened intently for sounds within Tatum's chest. "The heart is in spasm," he said after fifteen seconds. "The current didn't fully seize it."

Kenner nodded to the three officers at the panel and they each threw a switch again. The electrocution process was repeated.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Another twenty-four hundred volts. Another full minute. The body lurching, then stopping limply. The doctor listening. Then: "He's dead."

"Record the time," Kenner instructed.

"Six-eleven," the doctor said.

As officers entered the chamber to close the blinds, Kenner walked back into the area of the holding cell, Bob Simms keeping pace briskly just behind him.

"Where's Ginger?" asked Kenner.

"On her way over."

"Have her taken back. She's been commuted. I'll be in the warden's office."

He walked away quickly as Simms began speaking urgently into his radio.

Three hours later, Kenner ran into Rachel Geary as they were both leaving to go home. They fell in step together walking toward the parking lot.

"Get Ginger back over to Waverly all right?" he asked.

"Yes, we did. Had her back in her old cell by seven-thirty. Still wearing her lime-green undies—but *without* all that beautiful hair. How'd Jack go?"

"Complaining about injustice," Kenner replied drily.

"I'll bet." Rachel laughed softly. "You should have seen the people at the gate when we left. With the day turning out to be a draw for them, the protesters became part supporters, and the supporters became part protesters. They didn't know quite how to act. Finally they just left."

"I can imagine what the media is already doing with the story," Kenner said. "Poor boy goes to the chair, rich girl gets commuted. Our esteemed governor really threw a hand grenade into the public's feelings today; something for everybody, but nobody got everything. Now everybody can wonder which mistake he made: killing Jack or letting Ginger live."

"I had a grandmother who was half Sioux Indian," Rachel said. "She believed that the mistakes made in life were just so people could enjoy getting over them. Without mistakes, she said, no one could ever be happy. And she didn't believe that mistakes had anything to do with how people end up in life. She said everybody followed a blood path handed down by all the ancestors that came before them; that those blood paths would lead people to the same place no matter what they did. Her grandfather told her that when she was a little girl, and she believed it until she died."

"Blood paths," Kenner said thoughtfully. "Interesting philosophy. I didn't know you were part Indian, Rachel."

"Lots of things about me you don't know, Grant."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

They reached the parking lot and at once came to Kenner's car. Rachel paused to say goodnight, but Kenner gently took her arm and continued walking down the lot toward her parking space. The vapor lights over the lot gave a smoky cast to their faces. At Rachel's car, Kenner took the keys from her hand, unlocked the door, and held it open for her. She slid behind the wheel and he handed her the keys.

"You off shift for the weekend?" he asked, leaning down with one arm on the roof of the car.

"Yes, I am. You?"

"Yes."

"Got anything planned?"

"Probably drive over to the coast and take my old boat out, do a little fishing."

"Do you and Elaine enjoy the boat?" Rachel asked.

"Elaine never goes out on the boat," he said as neutrally as possible. "She doesn't like the ocean."

"So you go alone?"

"Yes. I go alone." He paused a beat, then asked, "You like the water, Rachel? You like boats?"

She shrugged. "I've never tried it."

"Would you like to try it? With me?"

Their eyes met and each saw something in the other that neither had seen before in the ten years they had known each other.

"Yes, I would, Grant," she answered. "I'd like to try it with you."

Both of them tried to suppress self-conscious smiles, but neither of them was successful.

"You, uh, know the Lucky Prices all-night supermarket on the coast highway?" Kenner asked, his tone gaining enthusiasm.

"Sure. I've driven past it."

"Well, there's a little coffee shop inside. We could meet there for breakfast. Then we can pick up food for lunch, leave our cars on the lot, and walk to the mooring dock; it's right across the highway."

"Sounds great."

"The boat's not fancy or anything. I'm going to get a new one in a few years when I retire."

"I'll bet the boat is just fine," Rachel said.

"Is six too early?"

"No, six is okay." Their eyes met again. "I like to do things early in the morning."

"Okay," Kenner said. "See you then."

He closed the car door. She smiled through the car window at him as she started the engine, turned on the headlights, and drove away.

When Kenner got home, his daughter was sitting on the porch glider

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

waiting for him. She was wearing her new correction officer's uniform from her first day on the job at Waverly Prison for women.

"Hi, Daddy." She stood and posed for him in the porch light. "What do you think?"

"Looks great, honey," he said warmly. "How did the day go?"

"It couldn't have been better, Daddy," she told him, sounding extremely pleased. "Of course, everyone *knows* I'm the only child of the DWC at Scrubb, so they treat me like I'm one of the family already. But, Daddy, it was so *exciting*. It's a whole different world in there."

"Yes, it is. And you like it?"

"I *love* it! I just wish—well, you know—" She nodded toward the second floor, where her mother's lights were already out.

"She'll come around," Kenner assured her. "It's just hard for her to understand, that's all. We're all part of the same system. But she's in the part that tries to make the world better by teaching. You and I are in the part that does it by helping to thin the predators. People like your mother haven't accepted yet that the job we do is as important as the job they do. It may even be *more* important. We could exist without them, but I'm not sure they could exist without us. Highly educated people usually find that theory impossible to admit. But the main thing is that *we* understand it." Kenner embraced his daughter and kissed her on the cheek. "Welcome to the team, *Officer.*"

They sat together on the glider, looking out at the calm spring night.

"Everyone at Waverly was so surprised to get Ginger Tatum back at the last minute this evening," Susan said. "They couldn't believe she had been so close that her head was already shaved. How did her husband's execution go?"

"Overall, very well," Kenner said. "We got it done by eleven minutes after six."

"How does it feel, Daddy? To be in charge of a person's execution?"

"It feels good, honey," Kenner admitted. "It makes me feel like I imagine it must make your mother feel to produce an honor student. She's part of molding somebody good, I'm part of eliminating somebody bad. It's gratifying."

Susan took her father's hand and lay her head on his shoulder. "I'm glad I'm going to be like you, Daddy. I hope I can be in charge of an execution someday."

"I hope you can too, honey."

Kenner patted Susan's hand, remembering what Rachel had said about blood paths. He was glad his daughter was following the blood path he had followed. ●

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEXT ISSUE...

Picture Palace
BY LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

Castles
BY REGINALD HILL

Spinning
BY KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

Outsourcing
BY HENRY SLESAR

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE. Vol. 115, No. 6. Whole No. 706, June 2000. USPS 523-610, ISSN 0012-6328. Dell GST: R123054108. Published monthly except for a combined September/October double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription $33.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, $41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 54052, Boulder, CO 80322-4052. Editorial Offices, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, N.Y. 10016. Executive Offices 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649. © 2000 Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub Dept.,525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. For back issues, send your check for $5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite SM-100, 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855-1220. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add $2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

PRINTED IN CANADA

PRINTED WITH SOY INK

JANET HUTCHINGS
Editor

RACHEL FUNARI
Editorial Assistant

SUSAN KENDRIOSKI
Executive Director,
Art & Production

VICTORIA GREEN
Senior Art Director

JUNE LEVINE
Assistant Art Director

CAROLE DIXON
Production Manager

ABIGAIL BROWNING
Manager, Subsidiary Rights
& Marketing

BRUCE W. SHERBOW
Director of Newsstand Sales

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

JULIA McEVOY
Manager, Advertising Sales

PETER KANTER
Publisher

WARREN RIVERS
Editorial Director

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
DAVID GELLER PUBLISHER'S REP
(212) 682-1540 (Display Advertising)

RUSSELL JOHNS ASSOCIATES
(800) 237-9851 (Classified Advertising)

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

Ellery Queen June '00

Advertise to the World's largest mystery magazine audience with our Ellery Queen/Alfred Hitchcock combined classified section. Ad Rates per issue: $4.95 per word (10 word minimum), $350 per column inch (2.25 inch maximum). SPECIAL INTRODUCTORY OFFER: Buy two issues and receive a third issue FREE. Send orders to: Dell Magazines, Classified Department, P.O. Box 1510, Clearwater, FL 33757-1510. Direct inquires to: (800) 237-9851; Fax (727) 445-9380.

AUTHORS

AGENT SEEKING authors. SASE: Deb GEM, 4717 Poe Road, Medina, OH 44256. www.gembooks.com

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

FREE CATALOG Collectible and used mystery books. Dunn and Powell Books, Dept. DP, The Hideaway, Bar Harbor, ME 04609-1714, dpbooks@acadia.net/www.dpbooks.com

FREE CATALOGS Collectible/used mysteries. Murder is Served, 5273 Bittersweet Drive, Dayton, OH 45429. (937) 438-0211.

FREE LISTS. Quality used mystery paperbacks. Collections purchased. Steve Lewis, 62 Chestnut, Newington, CT 06111.

MYSTERY ADDICTS! Free Catalog! New and recycled detective fiction. Grave Matters, Box 32192-C, Cincinnati, OH 45232, www.gravematters.com

BOOKS AND PERIODICALS

MYSTERY LOVER'S Guide. 200 authors, 5,000 book titles. Sections for date read, ratings, etc. Price $12.99. Free shipping/ handling. Call: (877) 494- 9862.

A CONSUMER'S Guide To Insurance Policies. $12.95 postpaid. Marlene Weed, 11 South Termino, Long Beach, CA 90803.

GENERAL INTEREST

SOLVE MYSTERIES! Win prizes! Free details. Fraziers, 3 Cedar, Fair Haven, VT 05743.

HELP WANTED

$800 WEEKLY potential processing government refunds at home! No experience necessary. (800) 696-4779, Ext. 3014.

INTERNET

ONLINE MYSTERY magazine www.orchardpressmysteries.com

BUY 2 GET 1 FREE AD OFFER IN OUR MYSTERY COMBO

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF PLACING A CLASSIFIED AD IN OUR NEXT TWO ISSUES AND RECEIVE A THIRD AD FREE!

Your ad will reach a combined audience of 300,000 readers in our outstanding publications – **ELLERY QUEEN'S** and **ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S** mystery magazines. Call today for a new rate card.

DELL MAGAZINES

Classified Department • P.O. Box 1510 • Clearwater, FL 33757-1510

Call: (800) 237-9851 • FAX: (727) 445-9380

E-Mail: mystery@rja-ads.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

SOME PEOPLE WOULD KILL...FOR A COPY

But you don't need to! Subscribe to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine and you won't miss a single issue of all the mystery and intrigue you love. Each year you'll enjoy 10 issues of 144 pages and one double issue of 240 pages delivered directly to you door.

Act now and take advantage of this special introductory offer,

6 issues for just $9.97!

Enjoy the convenience of home delivery and save!

To order by charge card, call toll-free:

1-800-333-3311

Outside the U.S.A.: 303-678-0439

BY MAIL

Alfred Hitchcock • P.O. Box 54011
Boulder, CO 80322-4011

Please allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside USA: Add $4 per year for shipping and handling. All orders must be paid in U.S. funds.
*We publish a double issue once a year which counts as two issues toward your subscription.

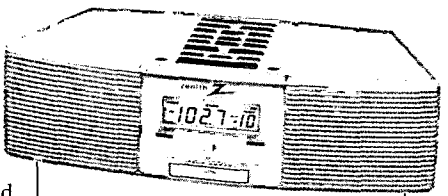
5P211

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Big sound from a stereo radio—without the big price!

Zenith Audio, a leading electronics manufacturer designs a "Small Footprint," "Big Sound" stereo system and drives the price below $100.



Zenith Audio has developed a Digital Stereo Clock Radio that boasts the acoustic quality and practical features of stereo radios four times as expensive. You'll be amazed at the sound quality and powerful bass you get from a radio this small and this affordable. This stereo radio features an 11-key hand-held remote control and an input jack for CD players or other audio sources.

Loaded with features. The AM/FM radio features digital tuning for pinpoint reception and crystal-clear sound. The STEREO indicator allows you to tune in to the stereo signal. It also picks up TV and WEATHER signals with 13 TV channels and 7 Weather channels, so your Zenith Audio Clock Radio is a great source of news, entertainment and information. You can program the unit's memory for 37 preset stations, and the tuning buttons can operate either manually or in a automatic search mode.

Practical functions. The backlit clock has several alarm functions, so you can wake to either radio, TV, weather or a buzzer. The sleep timer allows you to fall asleep to up to 90 minutes of music, TV or weather and then shuts off automatically. In the morning, if you need a few extra minutes of sleep, press the SNOOZE bar on the control panel or on the remote. The radio or alarm tone stops for 10 minutes and then sounds again. The unit's battery backup system will maintain the time, alarm and preset station memories in the event of a temporary power interruption.

Micro-Electronic Sound Breakthrough

State of the art stereo sound quality in a stylish cabinet

- **AM/FM/TV Bands**
- **Stereo Speakers with Crystal Sound System**
- **Digital Weather Band**
- **37 Preset Station Memories**
- **Ascending Tone Alarm**
- **Wake/Sleep to Radio, Weather or TV Band**
- **"Fail-safe" Alarm System**

Factory direct risk-free offer. You can spend hundreds of dollars more on a stereo radio, but why do it? We get the Stereo Clock Radio direct from Zenith and pass the savings on to you. This product comes with a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty and Comtrad's exclusive risk-free home trial. If you are not satisfied for any reason, simply return it within 90 days for a full "No Questions Asked" refund.

Zenith Crystal Clear Stereo. .$99.95 $12 S&H

Please specify white or black.

Please mention promotional code 4242-17910

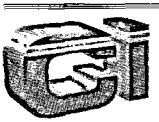
For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

800-992-2966

DISCOVER NOVUS VISA MasterCard

To order by mail, send check or money order for the total amount including S&H. To charge it to your credit card, enclose your account number and expiration date.

Virginia residents only—please include 4.5% sales tax.



comtrad industries

2820 Waterford Lake Dr., Suite 102
Midlothian, Virginia 23112

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED